

桜庭
一樹

Kazuki Sakuraba



VII 薔薇色の人生

GOSICK

— ゴシック —

Le crime passé est rejoué dans le théâtre fermé.
La fontaine de sagesse a atteint la vérité,
et la camarade essaye de la cacher.

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“Dance you shall,” said he, “dance in your red shoes till you are pale and cold, till your skin shrivels up and you are a skeleton!”

Hans Christian Andersen, The Red Shoes

Prologue: The Girl

A woman was locked in a stone tower.

Surrounded by a frigid forest, the structure, slender with nothing but a narrow spiral staircase, looked more like a huge sword made of ice than a stone tower. The only things visible through the small square window was the moon and the dense forest. Not a single beast's cry could be heard from the woods. For a forest, winter was the season of death.

At the very top of the tower, in a small room as cold as an ice storage, a woman was chained up. No, she was too young to be called a woman. Her tiny face was frozen with fear, anger, and sorrow. She was staring at a spot on the wall with eyes as cloudy as the dead's. Her simple clothes, which seemed like just white fabric, were hardly enough to keep out the midwinter cold.

Two steel chains stretching from the walls held both of her pale wrists.

Every time the woman, or rather the girl, moved a little, the chains rattled, stopping her.

The night wind howled outside the tower. The girl swallowed, and her shoulders quivered. Her pale lips slowly parted, revealing pearly white teeth.

The wind stirred horrifying memories. Between her lips peeked a hole as dark as the abyss, and from within it came a dreadful howl.

The cry of a beast, deep and loud, rose from the depths of her emaciated body.

The stone tower shook so violently that it looked as if it might collapse at any moment.

The girl's small shoulders were trembling. Eventually she lifted her head.

Eyes gleamed darkly beneath her unkempt hair. Opening her lips once more, she let out a spine-chilling cry that ripped through the night.

The wind battered the stone tower like spindrift. The girl's cry and the wind's howling mingled to create an ominous sound that echoed endlessly

through the wintry forest of death.

Chapter 1: Winter Morning

The winter sun was shining down on the garden of St. Marguerite Academy.

Snow that had fallen silently through the night piled up on the grass, the roof of the gazebos, and the iron benches, glistening white in the morning sun.

Even the crystal statue of the goddess in the middle of the fountain, frozen in a layer of snow, twinkled. It was early on a Sunday morning; there were no students, teachers, or gardeners about.

From the pure-white carpet of snow on the lawn came the sound of soft footsteps. A small Asian man wearing a thick coat, buttoned up to the top, a bowler hat, and a scarf wrapped twice around his neck, was walking slowly, silently, through the desert of undisturbed, early-morning snow.

It was Kazuya Kujou.

His tightly-pursed lips, combined with his yellowish skin and jet-black eyes, both rare in this country, made him look grumpy.

Upon closer look, Kazuya was holding a large carrot firmly in his right hand. Like a samurai brandishing a sword, he held the carrot out in front of him.

“Here, here.”

In response to his low, sheepish call, a chunk of snow, or rather a small and round hare, appeared from behind a tree.

Kazuya’s expression softened. “I knew it! A rabbit!” A pure, childlike smile appeared on his face.

He bent down and offered the carrot. “I saw you jumping through the snow out the window of my room earlier. It’s a cold Sunday. I’d bet Victorique’s even more bored than usual. Come, little bunny. Come with me to visit the terribly whimsical, mean, smart, snarky, and lonely Wellspring of Wisdom.”

The hare’s red eyes, round as a glass ball, blinked. Staring at him blankly, the creature hopped away.

“Wait! Don’t go!” Kazuya quickly went after it, his pace quickening as the hare bounded.

From the other side of the lawn appeared Avril Bradley, a foreign student from England. What she was up to so early on a Sunday morning, no one knew. She was wearing a trench coat and a hunting cap on her head. Holding a large magnifying glass in one hand, she was studying the snowy ground like a detective.

Kazuya, holding out a carrot, and Avril, holding a magnifying glass, bumped heads under a large tree. Avril yelped. Snow fell from the branches. They brushed the snow off their hats.

“Good morning, Kujou. What are you doing?”

“Uh, you know, chasing a rabbit.”

“Why are you holding a mandrake?”

“It’s a carrot.”

“I’m actually looking for a necrostone.”

“Besides, mandrakes aren’t real,” Kazuya explained gravely. “It’s just a fictitious plant often found in the ghost stories you read... Wait, what did you say?” He gave Avril a curious look.

Avril smugly took out a book from her coat pocket titled Ghost Stories: Volume Four.

“So necrostone is a stone from Africa that has been around since ancient times. If you make it into powder and drink it, your corpse won’t rot even after you die. Not only that, but your soul also remains, so corpses that don’t decompose walk around at night. They come home to their families, saying, ‘I’m home, where’s my snack?’ or ‘What happened to my room?’ and then... Wait, where are you going?”

“I’m, uh... kinda busy. Oh, crap. I’m gonna lose the rabbit!”

Kazuya trotted away, and Avril, holding a magnifying glass like a young detective, followed close behind.

Kazuya found the rabbit curled up under a bench. Gently, he reached for it and picked it up.

Ms. Cecile passed by on the pathway in the distance, yawning and rubbing her eyes drowsily. She was wearing a soft coat and a brown woolen hat on her head. She glanced over at Kazuya, who was holding a rabbit happily, and rubbed her eyes again as she went on her way.

Avril, already tired of searching for the supernatural stone, put the book and magnifying glass in her pocket.

She clapped her hands. “I know. Hey, Kujou. Since it’s Sunday, how about going shopping with me in the village?”

“Shopping?” Kazuya wondered. “What are you buying so early in the morning?”

“There’s a human chess tournament before Christmas break. I need to buy materials for the costumes. Right now I can take my time and choose before the others wake up.”

“But I need to take this rabbit to—” Kazuya shut his mouth and turned to the winter sky.

The snow had stopped falling in the middle of the night and the sun was shining brightly. The library tower, a majestic stone structure that filled the sky, loomed over them.

A hall of knowledge. An altar that housed books, the greatest in all of Europe. A large building, terrifying yet always quiet.

Kazuya’s heart ached. He closed his eyes for a moment.

Avril pulled on his arm, and he staggered forward with a grunt.

“Wh-What is it?!” he exclaimed as they ran.

“We’re going to the village. We’ll be the store’s first customers! Run, Kujou!”

“I can’t believe you.”

The hare escaped from Kazuya’s arms and landed on the ground.

“Ah.”

Red eyes blinked, then the hare bounded away across the snowy plains, its round butt swaying.

“There it goes.”

“Let’s go!”

Crestfallen, Kazuya headed toward the academy’s main gate, with Avril pulling him along.

The year was 1924.

The Kingdom of Sauville, a small European country, also known as the little giant of Western Europe.

A thick forest marked its border with Switzerland. An endless expanse of beautiful rural landscape separated it from France. A dazzling summer

retreat along the Mediterranean Sea demarcated its boundary with Italy. If the Gulf of Lyon facing the Mediterranean was the magnificent entrance to this kingdom, which was long and narrow like a mysterious corridor, then the Alps on the other side were the secret attic hidden deep within. Surrounded by world powers, it had a long history, surviving even the Great War, and was now safely sailing onto the modern age like a small boat. At the outskirts of a village located at the foot of the mountains quietly stood a school where the atmosphere of the Middle Ages still lingered.

Saint Marguerite Academy.

Boasting a long and grand history, though not as long as the kingdom itself, it was an educational institution for the children of aristocracy, a place shrouded in a veil of secrecy. A large French-style garden surrounded the U-shaped school building, while the campus itself was hidden from view by tall hedges. Rumors said that some of the kingdom's secrets were born and buried in this mysterious school.

After the end of the Great War, the academy began accepting students from some allied countries.

Fifteen-year-old Kazuya Kujou was one of them. Hailing from an island country in the Far East, he was accepted for his excellent academic record, but the students' unwelcoming attitude had given him a hard time in this foreign land. Then he met a mysterious girl named Victorique de Blois, a descendant of the Gray Wolves. Confined in St. Marguerite Academy, also known as the kingdom's secret arsenal, she possessed astonishing intelligence.

Before he knew it, Kazuya's life as an international student had begun to revolve around Victorique.

"Please stop pulling my arm, Avril! You're gonna rip it off!" someone screamed as they walked past the boys' dormitory.

Snow had blanketed the garden, turning it into a white and fluffy Christmas cake that had just been topped with cream and ready to be decorated. It was a chilly morning, but in the dining room on the first floor of the boys' dormitory, the large, blazing stove provided warmth enough to redden one's cheeks.

On a simple chair by the window, the dorm mother, Sophie, was sitting with one knee propped up. Her fiery-red hair was pulled back in a bun, and

her large breasts peeked out from under her apron. She lifted her freckled, mischievous-looking face.

“Wait, was that Kujou?” she mumbled to no one in particular. She scratched her neck. “Which reminds me, he just barged in with a sleepy face earlier, asked for a carrot, and pointed outside while saying something. Then he left.” She cocked her head. “I think he mentioned something about a rabbit. Well, whatever.”

She reached for a cup of honey tea filled to the brim and looked down at the newspaper spread open on the table.

The front page featured a rather disturbing political article. **“Breakdown of Alliance?”**, **“Joint Meeting Soon!”**, **“Possible Firestorm in Eastern Europe?”**, and other ominous words were written all over it.

Sophie frowned momentarily, then flipped through the pages.

Her breath caught in her throat. Holding her cup of tea, she read the article in the entertainment section.

A play was going to be performed at the Phantom, a long-established theater in Saubreme, the capital of the Kingdom of Sauville. And the name of the play was...

“‘The Blue Rose of Sauville Returns!’ Let’s see here... It’s been ten years since the mysterious death of Coco Rose. The legendary play that detailed the life of the beautiful, pure, and lonely queen who still lives on in people’s hearts will be performed again starting tonight.’ Wow!”

Sophie gripped the newspaper tight and looked into the distance.

“I-I wanna see it...”

Thinking back, when she came to St. Marguerite Academy to work as a maid, she collected photos of the lovely queen and pasted magazine clippings on her walls.

Sophie contemplated for a while, scratching her chin. Then she stood up and gulped down her tea.

“All right. I’m checking it out!” She placed her hands on her hips. “Saubreme is just a short ride away. It’s Sunday, and as long as I return tonight, I’ll be fine. Let’s go!”

A strange, golden drill was moving across the snowy landscape outside. Snow fell from a branch.

Somewhere a little winter bird chirped.

At the back of the snowy French-style garden was a dark flowerbed maze that seemed to reject outsiders. Snow covered the trees, tangles of black and bare branches looming like skeletons.

Two Gray Wolves were hiding behind the branches of a large tree overlooking the flowerbeds.

One was small and pretty as a doll, her golden hair like an unfurled velvet turban, fluttering coldly in the winter wind. Sadness and anger lurked in her deep-green eyes, and her tiny lips, glossy as cherries, were tightly pursed.

She was wearing an elegant dress made of black silk and adorned with green torchon laces. A necklace of black pearls was wrapped a few times around her neck, and a headdress ornamented with black feathers sat on her head.

Sitting on a thick branch, she was wearing a stern look, though her feet, wrapped in rose-embossed boots, were swinging idly in contrast.

Her jade-green fur coat billowed out in the wind, flared like a large bird spreading its wings.

The mother wolf, Cordelia Gallo.

Standing beside her was Brian Roscoe, a tall and slim man with fiery-red hair and green eyes, upturned as a cat's. He had odd features, possessing both the ferocity of a beast, and the delicateness of a young boy. Wearing a top hat and a tailcoat, he was huddled close to Cordelia as if protecting her.

The two Gray Wolves were watching the world below.

They spotted something sharp and golden walking along the snow-covered path, accompanied by the sound of hurried footsteps.

"Looks like we were right," Cordelia murmured in a deep, rumbling voice that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth.

Brian nodded wordlessly.

The footsteps belonged to Inspector Grevil de Blois. Sporting his pointy hair, he was wearing white riding boots and a stylish, white sailor coat. He was dragging a huge suitcase with him.

Cordelia scowled. "Right on cue, Albert's dog!"

"So it seems," Brian grunted. "The storm must be close." His canine teeth, sharp as a beast's, glinted ominously.

Inspector Blois stepped into the maze of flowerbeds. His pointy, golden hair glittered under the winter morning sun.

Someone was following him, tripping and slipping along the way. Cordelia and Brian cocked their heads simultaneously.

A young woman with shoulder-length brown hair and droopy eyes dashed into the maze. She was wearing a coat over her nightgown, a woolen hat, and round glasses. She seemed furious.

“Who’s that?” Cordelia asked.

“No idea. Either way.” Brian cracked his neck. His eyes gleamed darkly. “The second storm is getting closer by the minute. For now, we should head to Saubreme. Get ahead of them. Cordelia.”

“What?”

“Let’s see what your beloved daughter, the abominable pup Victorique can do.”

Cordelia stood up. A gust of wind blew, flaring her jade-green coat behind her like wings into the winter sky. The bottom of her dress rippled.

“Of course,” she said. “But know this. My daughter is strong. She will never give in, even if the world is rocked by a storm like never before.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“Her intellect and her kindness are unparalleled. I have faith in my daughter’s power.”

Brian snorted.

“It’s the only thing that’s given me strength to keep living a life that’s been filled with nothing but rage and humiliation.”

Brian looked away. “Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

A strong wind gusted, then died down.

There was no one on the branches anymore, only a stark tree.

A chunk of snow fell to the ground.

Bare branches stirred, quiet and dreary.

The garden was as quiet as the calm before a storm.

“Wait, you dumb, pinheaded Inspector! Whatever you’re up to, I won’t let you do it!”

“I can excuse dumb, but pinhead is where I draw the line! No, wait. It’s the other way around. Who are you calling dumb, huh?! Ugh, let me go!”

After a number of twists and turns inside the maze of frozen, black-and-white flowerbeds, they finally arrived in front of a tiny building that looked

like a candy house.

The piled-up snow looked like sprinkled white sugar, making it seem tastier than usual.

“Stop biting me!” Inspector Blois cried in pain. “Grown people don’t bite! Let go of me, weird lady!”

Ms. Cecile was biting Inspector Blois’s arm hard.

“I said let go! Ouch!”

“You’re not fooling me. What are you doing in the academy with a large suitcase on a Sunday morning? Headmaster, Chairman, I found someone suspicious! Call security quick!”

“Be quiet, you idiot!”

“Your swinging that suitcase around means it’s empty. You’re planning to take Victorique away again, aren’t you?! I’m her teacher. I know everything. But she’s not going anywhere. I don’t know why you’re doing this, but I won’t allow you to put her in danger!”

“Shut it, four-eyes!”

“Pointy-headed degenerate!”

“Glasses, Inspector Pinhead. Can you keep it down? It’s too early for all this racket.”

A husky voice, deep as if echoing from the depths of hell, came from somewhere close. Inspector Blois and Ms. Cecile froze. Locked in a grapple, they turned to the candy house.

But there was no one there.

“I understand what’s going on. I’m leaving again, aren’t I?”

The voice, soft and sinister, felt like the dead’s cold hands touching the heart, capable of robbing one’s humanity and body heat in an instant.

They swallowed and glanced down. Ms. Cecile still had her teeth in the inspector’s arm, while Inspector Blois’ tight grip remained on her brown hair.

The owner of the voice barely reached their chest.

A girl as small as a porcelain doll, lovely and terrifying at the same time, was standing there, blowing a ceramic pipe.

Her long, magnificent golden hair, just like her mother’s, hung to the ground like the golden tail of a mystic, prehistoric creature. Her upturned, emerald eyes were calm and melancholic, yet terribly cold, like someone who’d lived for a hundred years.

She was wearing a red-and-white taffeta dress with plenty of ruffles and gathers, its wide sleeves puffed up like rosebuds. The bottom of the dress billowed out like a rose on the verge of blooming. The large ribbon on her neck, the flower-shaped mini hat on her tiny head, the shiny lace brooch on her chest, and her shoes, sparkling like glass, were all different shades of pink. Her glamorous attire, a soft mixture of red, white, and pink, belied her sad expression.

She looked up at Inspector Blois. “Is this Father’s... the Ministry of the Occult’s orders?”

“How do you know?”

“My Wellspring of Wisdom,” the girl—Victorique de Blois—answered curtly, keeping the same expression. Her deep-green eyes glinted dreadfully.

A dry wind blew.

Anxious, Ms. Cecile glanced at them both.

A moment later, Inspector Blois exhaled sharply and gave his sister a hateful glare. He took his hand off Ms. Cecile’s cheek, and, dragging the suitcase, strode up to the house. “There’s a case I’d like you to solve. But it’s not something that happened recently. It’s an unsolved murder that made headlines ten years ago. Does Saubreme’s most infamous murder case ring a bell?”

“Saubreme’s most infamous murder case?” Victorique’s face remained blank. “Wait, you mean *that* case?!”

“Yes.”

Ms. Cecile quietly followed them, listening to the siblings’ conversation as they entered the candy house. She seemed more serious than ever, her large eyes opened wide.

A cute little hare appeared, hopping through the snow. It approached Ms. Cecile and tried to get on her lap and pull the pom-pom on the tip of her woolen hat.

“Please don’t bother me, little bunny,” she said as she dodged the hare. “The little Gray Wolf is in trouble.” Then realizing something, she looked back. “Wait. You’re the rabbit that was playing with Kujou just now. So you’re his friend, huh? Good. In that case...”

Ms. Cecile produced a note and started writing a letter. “Let’s see... ‘It looks like Inspector Pinhead is taking Victorique away again.’ As to where... um, there we go. I’m really worried, though. I wanna go too. What

to do, what to do... Wait, I got it!" She glanced at the large suitcase left at the front door and nodded gravely.

While listening to the voices coming from inside the house, Ms. Cecile wrote, 'I heard Saubreme's theater! Come quick, Kujou!' When she finished writing, she tied the letter around the rabbit's pure-white ears and let it go. Furrowing her brows, she listened closely again.

"Did you say 'Phantom'?" Victorique asked in a low, shaky voice.

"I did," Inspector Blois said. "I hear they're performing 'The Blue Rose of Saubreme.' But that's irrelevant. The theater's basement is actually being used by the Ministry... Actually, I'll share the details on our way to Saubreme."

"So I'm going to Phantom?" Victorique's voice still quivered.

"What is this Phantom they're talking about?" Ms. Cecile whispered to herself.

Inspector Blois sniffed audibly. "It might be a special theater to you, but it has nothing to do with the case. What you will solve is—"

"I already know."

Hearing their grumpy footsteps coming closer, Ms. Cecile quickly bent down. A knot twisted in her gut, and her face turned grim.

She opened the large suitcase that was lying around, silently slipped inside, and closed it. The two brown pom-poms on her wool hat peeked out a little through the gap.

The siblings exited the house in sullen silence. Victorique was now wearing a pink cotton cloak over her red-and-white dress and silk gloves adorned with pearls.

Inspector Blois looked around. "Hmm? Looks like the fussy teacher is gone," he said with relief. Then he took a deep breath. "You are to solve the biggest unsolved case in our kingdom that took place ten years ago in 1914. The murder of Sauvile's Queen, Coco Rose."

Dead leaves fluttered down, rustling mischievously around their feet.

"You sure bought a lot. Are you really going to use them all?"

Kazuya had left the village's general merchandise store and was trudging along the snowy road. Avril was walking in front of him, empty-handed.

“Ah, I can’t wait for the human chess tournament!” she exclaimed, waving her hands around.

Kazuya, leaning backward, was carrying several boxes of goods, unable to see the road ahead of him. He walked very carefully so he wouldn’t drop even a single item on the snow.

“So what’s this tournament about? Why do you need so many costumes to play chess? You bought a warrior’s outfit, shoes, bow and arrows. You also bought a queen’s dress and tiara, a king’s crown and cloak. The store’s shelves had a completely different selection than usual. It doesn’t make any sense to me at all.”

“Well, you see.” Avril skipped back to him. “Human chess is a form of chess where we build a huge chessboard in the garden and each student plays as a rook, queen or king. It’s so much fun!”

“Oh, I see,” Kazuya said.

An old wagon rumbled past. He stopped to give way, then resumed walking.

“We have that back in my country, too. We call it human *shogi*. It’s been around for a long time, apparently. It’s entertainment for the lords. When they watch the cherry blossoms in the spring, everyone dresses up in uniforms from the Warring States period. Hey, are you listening?”

“We’ve got trouble, Kujou!”

“Whoa! Don’t push me! You’re gonna make me drop the boxes!”

“Look at those two!”

Kazuya and Avril had walked a long way and arrived near the entrance to the academy. Kazuya couldn’t really look at whatever Avril was pointing at because of the pile of boxes blocking his vision. Her insistence finally made him stop. He shifted his body and looked in the direction she was pointing.

A vast, snowy landscape.

Kazuya narrowed his eyes. “If I recall correctly, this was a bellflower plantation. I saw an old woman and a male servant tending to it from time to time. It’s all covered with snow, though.”

“A ghost story!”

“What?”

“Take a good look, Kujou!”

Peering hard, he saw a familiar old lady and a young servant of mixed race, discussing something about the fields, pointing in all directions across the snowy landscape.

“Remember the story about the necrostone?” Avril sounded excited for some reason. “I believe it’s an African stone. A mixed-race servant loved his master so much that he made her drink it. After she died while giving birth, her ghost walked through the fields at night, singing as she held a baby in her arms. Kyaaah!”

“Hmm.” Kazuya let her words pass through his ear. “But it doesn’t look like the servant’s crushing a stone, and the lady doesn’t look like a ghost. I’ve been telling you, Avril. You should keep a calm mind. Whoa!”

A sturdy black carriage, as if carrying a messenger from hell, burst out of the main gate of St. Marguerite Academy. Kazuya quickly jumped out of the way. Avril also dodged with a squeal.

For a brief moment, a long, golden hair, like the tail of some mysterious, ancient creature, stirred through the window of the carriage as if calling for help. Then the carriage moved further and further away, leaving thick, ominous ruts in the road.

It felt like a sudden gust of dark wind blowing in from the future.

Kazuya couldn’t see anything; the pile of boxes had obstructed his vision.

“That was close,” he sighed.

Shifting the boxes in his hands, he resumed walking. Behind him the huge black carriage quickly disappeared into the direction of Saubreme.

The winter morning sun glimmered softly.

Two jet-black horses were galloping, their black manes fluttering in the winter wind like black smoke. Hooves clattered on the snow. Wheels squealed like the screams of a man.

A large, black steel carriage drove out of the village along the snowy road and was advancing through the desolate woods. It was daytime, but the tall trees made it dark. It was ominously cold, as if the carriage was on its way to the underworld. Even the driver had his head ducked as he took soft breaths.

Inside the carriage, a girl who looked like a large pink rose—Victorique—was sitting with her golden hair spread out on the seat. Across from her

was Inspector Blois. Both were resting their elbows on the window, looking at opposite directions. The eerily similar way their cheeks were puffed up in displeasure and the motion in which they smoked their pipes was enough to convince anyone that they were indeed siblings.

Between them was a large suitcase.

A sinister forest slid past outside. A black bird made a choking cry as it slowly flew by. There were no other signs of life nearby. A grave silence lay heavy on the land.

“Say something,” the sister commanded in a low, husky voice. “I’m bored to death.”

“Why don’t you dance, then?” the brother swiftly replied. “Your mother is a dancer. How about entertaining your brother with some sensual moves?”

“You want me to dance here?” Victorique said wearily, removing the pipe from her cherry lips. “Do you want to lose your feet?”

Inspector Blois glanced at her polished pink shoes’ heels, sharp as a weapon. He shuddered and fell silent.

The carriage rocked; it seemed to have run over a large stone.

The suitcase let out a faint grunt... or at least, it sounded like it did. Inspector Blois stared at it suspiciously, then looked away.

Hooves clattered along the road.

Inspector Blois placed his feet on the suitcase. “I don’t care about you or your mother.”

“You’re the one who brought her up.”

“Hrngh... Anyway, let’s talk about the murder of Coco Rose.”

“Hmph!”

“I’m sure you know about it. Twenty-seven years ago, Coco Rose, the young and lovely queen, came from France to marry into the Sauville royal family. It was 1897, almost at the turn of the century.”

“I don’t know much. I wasn’t born yet, after all.”

Inspector Blois exhaled sharply. “I’m sure you know about some trivial incident that happened in a corner of Europe centuries before you were even born. Like a demon, you use your cursed brain and eerie green eyes... But that’s beside the point.”

“Stop bringing up irrelevant things, then.”

“Hghh... Anyway, back to Coco Rose.” Inspector Blois frowned deeply. “The lovely queen, in her blue dress, instantly captivated the people of Sauville. Her elegant appearance as she stood beside the young king, His Majesty Rupert de Gilet, was so breathtaking that she seemed descended from the heavens. She was particularly popular among young women. Her photographs, writing papers and envelopes with her liking, the queen’s favorite French hairstyle and hat, were all the rage. But despite her popularity, she was said to be terribly lonely.”

Victorique nodded solemnly. “She had married young, was unable to get accustomed to Sauville, had no friends, and was constantly depressed.” She took a puff. “Her only friend was the maid that accompanied her from France who looked just like her. They spent many evenings together in her bedroom, reminiscing about their lives back in France.”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps to relieve her anxiety, she gradually immersed herself in the occult. In 1897 she met the alchemist Leviathan. While His Majesty Rupert de Gilet deepened his ties with the Academy of Science, led by Jupiter Roget, Queen Coco, through the alchemist Leviathan, strengthened her ties with our father, Marquis Albert de Blois, and the Ministry of the Occult. Her power in the court rapidly increased, but some say that this caused her relationship with the king to grow even colder. Her relationship with Leviathan was also scrutinized.”

“That’s right.” Inspector Blois put down his pipe and rubbed his chin several times.

The landscape outside had changed from an eerie forest to a frozen canyon. The carriage, like a black spot, was running down a gentle slope from the Alps to Saubreme.

“But Leviathan vanished in the year 1900,” the inspector continued. “As to why, you solved that mystery yourself. He had been hiding as a corpse in a secret room in St. Marguerite Academy’s clock tower for a long time, hiding the dark skin under his mask and the mountain of gold he brought from the scorching land across the sea.”

“Yes.”

“From then on, Queen Coco began missing more and more official functions because of her illness. She had a lovely country house built in the suburbs and moved out of the luxurious royal palace. Apparently, the king

rarely visited her. According to one version of the story, her belly had grown big, but no baby was born. Rumors abounded that she had a miscarriage, which caused her mental suffering. The people took pity on the lonely Queen Coco and accused His Majesty Rupert of being a cold-hearted man.”

Victorique blew her pipe. “But there was a different rumor as well.”

“Indeed.” Inspector Blois nodded. “After moving to the country house, Queen Coco earned the favor and sympathy of the people as the Blue Rose, a solitary and quiet woman, hiding madness deep inside. But back then there were first-hand accounts of her being spotted outside at night reveling in the pleasures of life. She wore fancy dresses and make-up, sprinkled cheap perfume all over her body, and danced and laughed with the men of the city. According to the tabloids, she had a magic stone given to her by Leviathan that made her invisible as long as she was holding it. It allowed her to leave her country house in the suburbs and sneak into the city. When gossip columnists realized that the woman was, in fact, the supposedly lovely and quiet queen, they followed her around, but she always disappeared around a corner or in a small room in a tavern. It was said that this, too, was thanks to the magical stone turning her invisible.”

“What a load of hogwash.”

“So the other version of the story is that the quiet queen danced and drank wine every night. To tell the truth, I don’t mind the rumors about the queen’s wilder side in her later years. A merry woman is nice. I like it better than the version where she was holed up in a gloomy house crying her eyes out.”

Victorique didn’t say anything. Silently, she looked out the window.

They were getting much closer to the city. The dead trees, ominous birds, and half-frozen rivers had disappeared, replaced by brick houses and snow-covered fields.

“Anyway, Queen Coco suddenly passed away... No, she was killed. Ten years ago—”

There was a roaring of an engine. A black car was closing in at an astonishing speed, then overtook the carriage.

Victorique, her elbow propped on the window, saw the driver’s fiery-red hair and the eerie Mechanical Turk in the backseat. Her breath caught in her throat.

“What’s wrong?” Inspector Blois asked. He couldn’t see what she saw from his position.

“It’s nothing.”

The wind sent the red-haired man’s shiny, black silk hat flying into the air. Spinning, it glided through the carriage window and landed softly on Victorique’s dress.

The engine roared once more, and the car drove off into the distance. Victorique blinked in surprise.

“What is that?” Inspector Blois asked wearily.

“Leave me alone, pinhead.”

“Stop calling me that!” He looked away.

Ignoring her brother, Victorique flipped the silk hat over. A white dove emerged from the hat, its round eyes darting around. Inspector Blois jumped. Kicking the suitcase, he brought his legs up onto the seat. The suitcase let out a faint squeal.

“What is that?!” he cried. “You’re doing magic tricks in a time of national crisis?! Why are you such a calm and snarky squirt?! Where did you get the hat? Where did the dove come from? Stop pointing its face at me! Put it back in the hat!”

“Grevil,” Victorique muttered curiously. “Are you afraid of birds?”

“I am! I mean, no! If my sister learns about a weakness of mine, I’ll be tortured for the rest of my life. S-Stop. Don’t put it on my head! Its feathers, eyes, small talons... they’re disgusting!”

“Weirdo.” Victorique stood up and stretched her arms out. “Oops. I let go of the dove by accident.”

“You dunce!”

The dove flew around the carriage, then perched quietly on Victorique’s hand. Inspector Blois had his back to her. He was clutching his head, trembling.

“Oh?”

Victorique noticed a letter tied to the dove’s leg. She unfastened it and rolled it open. The dove hovered and perched itself on the pink mini-hat adorning Victorique’s head.

The letter was short.

“If you discover a secret that will protect you, give it to this dove immediately.”

Victorique was silent for a while. Then she lifted her head, her sad gaze following the fading car.

“It’s my mother’s handwriting,” she murmured. “Similar to the one that carved the words on the cross at the Village of the Gray Wolves.”

“You should just devour that dove whole! You’re a Gray Wolf, aren’t you? I can still hear its wings. Are you planning to kill your brother?!”

“Kill you? With a dove? You’re such an idiot.”

Victorique tucked the letter away. She reached above her head, grabbed the dove, and held it in front of her.

For a while she remained silent. Like the lonely queen.

“I can still hear it!” Inspector Blois kicked the large suitcase again.

Another yelp came from within. The impact popped it open, revealing Ms. Cecile, wearing only a coat over her nightgown. Victorique let out a shocked grunt.

Ms. Cecile brought her forefinger to her lips. “Ssh! I came with you because I was worried,” she whispered.

Victorique’s previous adventures had been fraught with peril, but the uneasy look on Ms. Cecile’s face said that she sensed that there was something different this time.

“So you followed us in your nightgown,” Victorique said dubiously.

“I didn’t have time to change. So where are we?”

“We’re almost at Saubreme. It’s not safe, Cecile. The next storm... You should just stay in the suitcase if possible.” Her deep voice belied the faint anxiety on her face.

“I have to hide.” Ms. Cecile nodded gravely. She hid in the suitcase and closed it.

“Cecile...”

Victorique glanced at the dove in front of her, the suitcase with a person inside, and the trembling Inspector Blois.

She then closed her eyes, which were deep as the abyss, and lost herself in her thoughts.

Slowly, she tilted her head. “A dove from a silk hat. Cecile from a suitcase. What a weird morning,” she mumbled. “I wonder if these are ominous signs that something is going to pop out somewhere.” She stared out the window.

There were more stone towers and modern buildings now. They were almost at the capital Saubreme.

A winter wind blew into the city, carrying the same chill as it did in the woods, shaking the hats, scarves, and coats of passersby.

Meanwhile...

The garden of St. Marguerite Academy was like a white cake; everything was covered in snow—the statue of a goddess on the fountain, frozen like an ice sculpture, the iron benches, the gazebos that seemed like cake décor.

Kazuya was running through the garden, gasping for breath. Behind him was Avril, tottering with a pile of shopping boxes.

“Thanks for carrying my stuff!” she said cheerfully, staggering on her feet. “But where are you going in such a hurry? We were talking casually just now.”

Kazuya looked over his shoulder. “I gotta go to Saubreme!”

“What? Saubreme?” Avril looked puzzled. Then she noticed Kazuya’s shockingly pale face. “What’s wrong? You were just wondering why I was shopping so early in the morning. Wait, I get it. You’re going shopping in Saubreme. But it’s too far away.”

Kazuya stamped his feet restlessly on the snowy ground. “I’m not shopping. I, uhh... I don’t have time to explain. See you later!” He dashed away.

“What was that about?” Avril wondered. Realizing something, she clapped her hands. “I smell something fishy! He’s not going to a department store in Saubreme to buy chess costumes, is he? Sneaky little...”

Kazuya yelped as he almost fell on the snow.

“Hey, are you okay?” Avril said. “Did you slip?” She looked closer and saw Kazuya holding a chunk of snow—no, a large hare. “A rabbit? Why?” She was getting more and more puzzled. She pressed her forefinger on her cheek. “I’m completely lost.”

A chilly winter wind blew past.

Kazuya was running down the pathway with an ashen face, holding the letter that Ms. Cecile had tied to the rabbit’s ear.

“Victorique,” he mumbled. “Inspector Blois. A theater in Saubreme. And the next storm!”

Kazuya bit his lip. *Something big is finally going down somewhere.*

The bleak future that the chief of the Village of the Gray Wolves foretold slowly came back to him like a rising black smoke.

“You will not die together.”

“Your bodies are light. No matter how strong your feelings are, you are no match for the wind.”

“But worry not.”

“Your hearts will never be apart.”

He shuddered. As he headed toward the front gate, a state-of-the-art motorbike suddenly appeared from behind him, its engine revving. It was brand new, with a silver body and black tires.

Who’s driving it? Kazuya wondered.

The driver spotted Kazuya. “Hey, if it isn’t Kujou!” They squeezed the brakes, and the bike pitched forward, the rear tire rising dangerously high.

“Whoa!” Startled, Kazuya stopped in his tracks.

“Why are you running?” the driver asked.

“Hmm?”

“Oh, I see you made friends with the bunny. That’s great. Bye!”

To Kazuya’s surprise, the voice inside the helmet belonged to Sophie, the dorm mother. She had put on a coat over her kitchen apron, and a hand-knitted scarf was wrapped around her neck. She seemed to be in a hurry.

“Where are you going?” Kazuya asked. “And with such an awesome ride.”

Sophie gave a mischievous wink. “Saubreme.”

“S-Saubreme?!”

“Yes. To a theater called Phantom.”

“A theater?!”

“Yeah. I’ve been wanting to see the play ‘The Blue Rose of Saubreme’ for a long time, and they’re performing it again starting today. So I quickly grabbed my bike.”

“Please take me with you!” Kazuya cried.

“Uh, what?” Sophie looked puzzled at first. “Sure, I guess.”

Kazuya climbed up on the back of the motorbike, still holding the rabbit.

“Hold on tight,” Sophie said, and he nodded.

The motorbike dashed away, its engine roaring like a raging man. It meandered along the French-style garden's pathway.

"Whoa!" Kazuya exclaimed. "I didn't know you could ride a bike. That's cool."

"This is my first time riding one!"

"...What?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine. It's fun, after all."

"I, uhh... I highly doubt that..."

Ignoring Kazuya's restlessness, the motorbike drove out the main gate of St. Marguerite Academy and raced down the same road that the steel carriage took, straight to Saubreme.

The roaring of the engine drowned out Kazuya's screams.

The winter sun was beaming down on the snowy road.

Mechanical Turk 1

I found myself in the theater.

I've gotten used to coming here now. After sleeping all day in my shabby lodgings, I get up in the evening and walk down the usual hill to get here. When I enter the green room, I'm greeted by my colleagues, all of whom look just as sleepy as I do. I put on my fancy make-up, change into my costume, and rehearse under the orders of the finicky manager. The alcohol I've been drinking until morning starts to wear off. I laugh with my fellow dancers.

The dancers say that once the show starts, it's a whole different world.

There's no business like show business. We dress up in fancy costumes, jump off the stage, and run through the audience. We sing and dance. Our hearts are empty. We have nothing. We left our home, we have no one to rely on, we have no reason to live. We just have meaningless fun every day. But that's okay.

Sing and dance.

A fellow dancer pokes me offstage. "Have you seen that young, red-haired man who's been coming a lot lately. Isn't he charming?"

I peek out from behind the curtain. I spotted a man, too young to be coming to a theater like this. Our eyes meet, and he smiles back at me shyly.

My cheeks flush. "He's just a kid."

"So are you."

"Actually, we're supposed to meet up tonight. He said he has something to tell me."

"Maybe he's going to profess his love for you."

"I don't think so. He says he came from the same village as me, which can't be true. The village I came from was located deep in the mountains, and I knew all the villagers. But he says he's the descendant of a villager who came to the city. When he first saw me, he knew that I was one of them."

“What kind of village did you even come from? But I can totally see it. You both have the same eyes. A deep green, frightening yet somewhat sad. It’s like you’re not young at all.”

“Now that’s just rude!”

“Ahaha, don’t tickle me. What I’m saying is, you have this wise air about you. You’ve seen some of the old people who come here, right? Scholars who look out-of-place in shows like this. They wear dusty old suits, and they have these profound eyes behind their unkempt gray hair. That’s the kind of vibe I’m getting.”

“Oh, we’re up. Life in rosy hues!”

“Crap. Life in rosy hues!”

We rush to the stage, wearing a sheer dress, almost like an undergarment, with a deep slit and roller skates.

We sing in unison.

We have no cakes, nor any muffins.

But we do have stale bread!

We have no prince on a white horse, nor an Arabian king.

But we have a lover!

Listen, you’re not alone.

So stop crying.

Life in rosy hues!

I glance at the red-haired boy as I dance wildly. He’s smiling while clapping his hands to the beat.

He was here yesterday and he’s here again tonight. I wonder what kind of work he does that allows him to come every night.

I am about to slide towards the boy when someone grabs my arm tightly.

It hurt.

He was a very rough guest. I put on an amiable smile and glance down at him.

A man of noble birth, who looked to be in his late twenties, with his blonde hair tied back, is looking up at me. His cruel, green eyes catch mine.

“Excuse me, Sir. You can’t touch a dancer. Not right now, at least.”

“...olf?”

“Hmm? I can’t hear you.”

I blink.

My false eyelashes are too heavy.

The nobleman lets go of me. I skate away from him and dance among the audience. I glance at my wrist. It was red. He had grabbed it with tremendous force.

I thought he asked me if I was a Gray Wolf.

I shake my head. I'm hearing things. I dance up to the red-haired boy and playfully perch myself on his lap.

"I'll be waiting by the backdoor," he whispers in my ear.

I nod, and look at his face.

His eyes are alarmingly serious. As my colleague had said, there was a deep and melancholic glint in them, like some old beast.

I get up and resume dancing.

The music ends.

The dancers glide through the audience and back to the stage.

So stop crying!

We point to the face of the dancers next to us and call each other's names. We then grab the hem of our dresses, skimpy as to be almost half-naked, and lift them up like a flower.

"Life in rosy hues!"

Giggling, we tug at each other's dresses, waving to the audience as the curtains come down.

The red-haired boy is on his seat, clapping his hands.

I look to the side.

The nobleman with the cruel eyes is no longer there. On the empty table sat a glass of cheap wine, still filled to the brim, shimmering an ominous blood-red.

Later that night.

I left the theater alone, ahead of my friends. I saw the red-haired boy standing behind the wooden door and waved a purple handkerchief at him. The boy noticed and turned to face me.

As I started walking, someone jumped out of the shadows and pulled a black cloth over my head. I saw the handkerchief fall softly onto the street.

There were three men, maybe four. They carried me in their arms without making a sound, like they were used to it, and pushed me into a carriage that was likely parked nearby.

I heard the red-haired boy calling my name, followed by hurried footsteps.

A dull thud, like someone being hit.

His yelp.

None of my kidnappers said a word. It seemed as if they were used to this sort of thing.

I was hit on the face several times, drugged, and then I fell unconscious.

And when I came to...

...I found myself here. Now.

I'm wandering the theater.

A familiar place.

As usual, I slept through the evening, got up and went down the hill. I enter the green room to the sound of my colleague's laughing.

But when I stepped inside, no one spared me a glance. I tried calling to them, but my voice was stuck in my throat. The dancers had changed; I didn't know any of them. They were using my mirror stand like they owned it, put on their costumes. Annoyed, I tried to disrupt them, but my hands touched nothing.

I looked around, panicking.

I found one familiar face. The dancer I was closest to. She teased me that night about the boy who kept coming to see our show. The friend I spent every day laughing with.

I called their name. Her gaze went to the ceiling, then around the green room. Could she not hear me? I strained my voice even harder.

A moment later, she reached for her face powder, perplexed.

"I thought I heard the voice of a girl I used to know."

"Used to know? How long ago was it?" someone said.

"About a year ago."

"A year is not that long."

"Ahaha. True. There was this girl I was good friends with. She had a rather pitiful upbringing. She came out of the mountains to Saubreme all by herself. Apparently, she had lived like she was still in the Middle Ages, and didn't know anything about the city. She was a pretty girl, so she managed to find work as a dancer. She had no family, no relatives, no friends, no lover."

"My. What a poor girl."

“Indeed. And apparently she was banished from her home for a crime she didn’t commit. She was a good-natured girl, though. One night a little over a year ago, she suddenly disappeared.”

“Wait, what happened?”

“I actually have no idea.” She shook her head sadly. “She said she was supposed to meet a boy who was a regular at the theater after the show was over. She didn’t show up the next day, so I went to her lodging house, but there was no sign of her coming home. The red-haired stopped coming to the theater as well.”

“That sounds bad. What if the boy killed her? It has to be murder!”

“He didn’t look like a bad kid. And you know how the cops are. She was just a dancer, so they didn’t do a proper search. I never saw her again. The poor, pretty girl vanished like smoke.” She wiped away her tears.

I looked around in horror.

Has it really been a year since that night?

What happened to me?

Am I already dead?

Did I become a ghost wandering aimlessly around the theater?

Saddened, I call out the name of my fellow dancer.

But my voice couldn’t reach her anymore. She wiped away her tears and reapplied her face powder.

I bolted out of the green room and onto the stage.

To the guest seating.

The basement.

The theater was empty. There was nothing but deathly silence and a ghost—me.

I look around.

I glance at my own hands.

I can see the floor through them.

I’m...

I’m a phantom!

I woke up with a start.

I could move. I realized then that it was just a dream. There was a clatter.

The next nightmare... No, the horror of reality came flooding back into me like a pool of blood.

With a hazy mind, I recalled the night a year ago when I was kidnapped in front of the red-haired boy, taken away in a carriage, and brought here.

In this stone tower.

A lot of terrible things had happened to me here.

Fear and loathing surged in me like a tidal wave. The night wind pounded on the walls of the tower. Everything outside the square windows was frozen in snow. My lips parted, and I howled.

I will not wake from this nightmare.

Because it's real.

And no one knew I was here. No one would help me until I was dead.

The chains dug into my wrist, and warm blood dripped. I remembered the pain and disgust I felt that night in the theater when the nobleman—Albert de Blois—grabbed me.

I closed my eyes.

My consciousness instantly faded, and my mind began wandering through time and space in search of the peaceful days when we sang, danced, and laughed together in Sauville's Phantom Theater.

Snow was falling softly outside.

Chapter 2: The Dancers of Phantom

Even on a winter morning, the streets of Saubreme were busy and full of life.

A traffic officer was standing in the middle of a huge intersection, blowing his whistle as he directed shiny cars and carriages through. Shoppers filled the cobblestone pavements. Fancy shops with their gleaming display windows were already open, showing the public the latest in European fashion, from clothes to hats to shoes.

The large steel carriage carrying Victorique and Inspector Blois drove past the intersection and down the wide street for a while, before coming to a slow stop in front of a building.

Avoiding the dove, Inspector Blois kept his head away from his little sister and quickly jumped out. Then reluctantly, he reached for the suitcase. It flailed inside the carriage for a while, resisting his pull.

Victorique was sitting silently, hanging her head. Then she lifted her face, stood up firmly, and disembarked from the carriage.

An old theater built of stone stood before them, its front wall adorned with the sculpted head of a lion, huge as a sphinx. Its wide-open mouth served as the entrance to the establishment. Surrounding it were wax figures of half-naked women dancing and singing merrily. They looked like ghosts of maidens permanently frozen in time. Their wide-open eyes were looking down the street.

Victorique stared at the building in silence for quite some time. There was no expression, no emotion, in her green eyes.

“So this is the Phantom Theater,” she muttered in a voice that was a mix of sorrow and rage.

Reporters, brandishing their state-of-the-art cameras like weapons, dashed toward the lion’s mouth, pushing Victorique aside. Victorique, Inspector Blois, the dove on Victorique’s head, and even the suitcase on the ground all looked at the door, wondering what was going on.

Next to a large sign for the play “The Blue Rose of Saubreme” stood two lovely young women in stunning blue dresses, posing for the cameras. The lead actresses, it seemed. Victorique blinked at the flashing lights.

They looked so much alike, with small, round faces. Both had bright blond hair and blue eyes.

The woman on the left was wearing a dress with puffy square sleeves, delicate laces concealing her neck, and a cameo brooch. Her hair was tied up in a high bun and adorned with pearl beads, a style that was popular a while back. It was the same hairdo that Queen Coco often wore in her public photos.

The woman on the right, in contrast, let her blonde hair hang naturally down to her shoulders. Her blue organdy dress was more modern, cut generously at the chest, and her ivory skin glistened in the winter morning sun.

The women were happily answering the reporters’ questions. Inspector Blois folded his arms and listened, nodding to himself. He was gradually leaning forward, eventually joining the reporters in asking questions.

“What are your aspirations?” he asked. “You must be very nervous to be selected for the role of Queen Coco.”

The actresses smiled. “Well, yes,” one said.

“But my parents and siblings in the countryside are happy,” the other added.

“Who are you?!” a reporter snarled.

“Who do you work for? You don’t even have a press badge. Hey, stop pushing me!”

“How come there are two lead actors?” Inspector Blois asked eagerly.

“Well, actually...”

“I play the older, quiet Coco, while she plays the wilder one. So we’re two people playing the same character.”

“A novel direction. Good luck with that. Hey, don’t push. I’m talking to the ladies.”

“And who are you supposed to be? Which publisher are you working for?”

“Does it matter? I’m a nobleman.”

They jostled each other for a while, until eventually the reporters’ robust buttocks pushed the inspector out of the crowd.

“Damn it,” Inspector Blois hissed. “Do they not know who I am? Ah, my hair is ruined. Let’s go, Victorique. Huh? Victorique?” He looked around, fixing his messy drill with both hands.

Shoppers, children, and businessmen with briefcases and walking sticks walked along the paved streets. A noisy crowd had gathered outside the theater.

The most powerful brain in Europe, the legendary Gray Wolf, the girl imprisoned in St. Marguerite Academy, Sauville’s secret armory, Victorique de Blois, who should never have been allowed to walk the streets of Saubreme, was nowhere to be found.

“D-Did she get away?”

Inspector Blois brought his hands to his mouth, standing still with bent legs. Then he staggered back and plopped down on the suitcase.

The suitcase moved, as though appalled that he would sit on it. The inspector bolted to his feet, then looked to the right, to the left, up, and down.

He cradled his head in his hands. His pointy drill glistened under the winter sun.

Pedestrians eyed him curiously as they passed by.

Meanwhile, Victorique was inside the Phantom Theater.

Like a ghost, she had managed to slip past the stern doorman at the entrance, perhaps because Victorique was too small, or he was distracted by the commotion caused by the actresses and journalists.

The play had not yet started, so the inside of the theater was dim and dusty, as though resting its weary body for tonight. The air was stale, and time seemed to pass slowly.

The spacious floor was covered with a glamorous, but worn-out, red velvet carpet. Upon closer look, it was frayed and a little dirty.

Victorique walked silently down the narrow corridor on the left. The dove perched on her head cooed.

Though it was not the best theater in Saubreme, it had a long history dating back to the last century. Both sides of the narrow corridors were filled with portraits of actresses and dancers from past generations. Pale lanterns dangling from the ceiling illuminated their faces.

The portraits closer the entrance were more recent, the women sharing the same hairstyles and makeup as the women outside. The deeper she went on, the more old-fashioned the ladies, with their vintage hairdos, lipsticks, costumes.

Victorique's small face stirred ever so softly with uneasiness and hope.

She looked up at one of the photos. The woman's name was scribbled on it, together with the year it was taken, 1920.

Victorique's steps hastened. She started running down the narrow, dim corridor. Startled, the dove on her head flapped its wings.

1915, 1913, 1910, 1909.

Finally, she stopped in front of a portrait.

1908.

Her trembling arm cautiously reached for the photo, for the past.

The old portrait displayed in front of her was taken nearly sixteen years ago. The woman's hair was tied in an older style, and an exotic ornament adorned her round forehead. She had almond eyes, quiet and melancholic at the same time, like those of a prehistoric creature. Glossy, cherry lips. Thick lipstick and eyeshadow, like a poor disguise to blend in the nightlife.

It was the same woman in the old photo inside the gold coin pendant that fell deep into the ravine outside the Village of the Gray Wolves.

Victorique couldn't possibly mistake that small face.

"Cordelia Gallo!"

An unfamiliar older woman's voice came from nearby, reverberating down the corridor with both shock and fear.

Victorique spun.

A woman who looked like an ancient ghost was standing there. She had a large build, with a few streaks of gray in her once-magnificent brown hair. She was wearing heavy make-up and an antiquated dress, like she had found it in her great-grandmother's cabinet in the attic. An extravagant tiara sat on her head.

Either she was a ghost of old, or a crazed lady who escaped from confinement.

The woman wrinkled up her freckled nose. "Ah, Cordelia!" she cried. "It's really you!"

"You know Cordelia Gallo?"

Victorique's voice held a note of both caution and a peculiar tenderness. Fear mixed in with familiarity.

Trembling, the woman stepped closer. "I can't believe it! It's been sixteen years, but you haven't aged a bit. No, you look younger, even. Are you a ghost? So you *did* die that night. After you met up with the red-haired boy, you disappeared without returning to your lodging house. Now you're a ghost wandering the theater. Ah, Cordelia."

"Who are you?"

"Don't you remember? It's me, Ginger Pie. You were my closest friend. We were always together, like sisters. Oh, Cordelia. Look what you've become." The strange lady, on the verge of tears, pinched Victorique's cheek. "Huh?" She froze. Doubtful, she pulled and twisted again and again.

"Stop that!"

"You're warm and soft for a ghost. What happened to you? You're as soft as a child, and you smell as sweet as milk. So you're not Cordelia? She always smelled of cigar and wine. The scent of the nightlife. But not you."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Ginger Pie, but my name is Victorique."

"..."

Pulling Victorique's cheek curiously, Ginger Pie compared her face to the portrait hanging on the wall.

Displayed in the year 1908, it bore the face of Cordelia Gallo, a star dancer during her time. Her lips seemed to curve into a bigger smile, as though secretly happy to be reunited with her old friend and her beloved pup.

Ginger Pie was silent, baffled.

"I'm her daughter," Victorique said curtly.

Ginger Pie instantly smiled. "Really? Her daughter? Wow! I have a little girl too. That means Cordelia didn't die that night. Ah, thank goodness. Being a dancer can be dangerous. Sometimes girls just disappear. I see. A daughter, huh? So poor Cordelia found happiness."

Victorique was quiet, hanging her head.

Ginger Pie peered worriedly into her face. Victorique could feel her breath, warm as a summer's day. She pushed the woman's face back with her hands.

"Ow, that hurts!" the lady exclaimed.

“We’ve been living separately for a long time for reasons. I don’t know how she’s doing, but she’s still alive, at least.”

“Is that so? In that case, I won’t pry any further.”

Victorique sat down on an old couch in the corner of the corridor. The lanterns flickered.

The glamorous photos of past actresses and dancers that filled the walls were staring at them eerily like it was a banquet of the dead. A group of beautiful women who sang and danced as they ran through an era of mania, roaring with laughter. Every face, though smiling, looked sad or angry. It was an odd sight.

“What’s with the odd outfit anyway?” Victorique asked. “You’re the one who looks like an ancient ghost, not me. I was actually terrified.”

Ginger Pie laughed cheerfully. “I’m wearing a costume for a play called ‘The Blue Rose of Sauvile’, which starts tonight. I’m playing the role of the king’s mother, the Queen Mother. Not that I have much screen time.”

“There was some sort of press conference going on outside. Shouldn’t you be there?”

She shrugged. “The young actresses can handle that. Not to brag, but I used to be a star dancer when I was younger. My breasts are still as splendid as before, but my waist was half its current size. I remember wearing blasphemous outfits—a Catholic wedding dress with roller skates. We would dance around our manager who was dressed in a priest’s attire. Back then, my body was as light as a feather, and I could do any kind of dance.”

“I see.”

“But getting old is not so bad. I have a little cutie waiting at home for her big mama. And getting old means more wonderful memories. Like the days I spent with your maman. I still remember her smile and her incredibly thin waist. I have a larger build, as you can see, so I played a lot of male roles during shows. We used to do a lot of blasphemous acts together.” She made the sign of the cross and gave a seductive wink. “We did some poor reenactments of Shakesperian plays, like Romeo and Juliet, and Hamlet. Cordelia played Juliet and Ophelia, of course. She looked great! Lovely, tiny, fragile. Oh, how I wish I could have sung and danced with that sweet little girl forever.”

“So you knew my mother well.” Victorique’s voice was weak and somewhat somber. “Back when she was free. Before she gave birth to me.”

“Yes. She told me how she was banished from her village in the mountains for a crime she didn’t commit, and wandered to Saubreme to become a dancer. Every day she drank and sang and danced. Then one night, a red-haired boy started coming to our show. He was a little odd.”

Ginger Pie cocked her head curiously. “Another girl told me that he was an apprentice to a famous magician, and that it was impossible for him to come to our theater every night because he had to assist his teacher on stage. But he really did come every night. It was like there were two of him, one at the magic show and the other in the theater.”

“A red-haired man... Being in different places at the same time.” Smoking her cigar, Victorique gave a small nod.

“One night, Cordelia Gallo just disappeared. The boy stopped coming too. I asked the girl from before who he was working under, but she said she couldn’t remember. I didn’t learn anything else.”

“Ahuh.”

“Anyway, I’m glad she’s alive. As long as you live, things will work out.” She paused and shook her head wearily. “Life in rosy hues.”

“So you’re very familiar with this theater. You’ve been here for almost twenty years, after all.”

Ginger Pie chuckled. “Oh, more than that,” she said proudly.

Victorique got up and started walking to the end of the corridor.

Ginger Pie quickly went after her and pulled her pudgy cheek. “You can’t go there!”

Victorique flailed her arms about. “Wh-Why do you keep pulling my cheeks? You can grab my wrist. Or my scruff, or my dress. Let me go!”

“Oh, sorry. I used to pull Cordelia’s cheeks a lot. It’s just habit.”

“Let go of me, or I’ll kill you.”

“And the way you get mad is exactly the same. Oooh, scary!” Ginger Pie placed her hands on her hips and laughed.

Suddenly she turned serious. She pulled on Victorique’s hand and headed for the theater’s entrance.

“Cordelia’s mysterious daughter,” she said. “The theater’s basement used to be used for shows, but in the last several years, there have been some government officials and aristocrats sneaking in and out of there. It’s just weird. We’ve been told not to go to the basement without permission.

It's a dangerous place for kids. I don't know what it is exactly, but it smells like trouble."

Puffing on her pipe languidly, Victorique fluttered her melancholic, green eyes.

The end of the corridor was as dark as the abyss. Straining the eyes revealed nothing. There was an eerie silence in the air, as though a monster was silently waiting with its mouth open.

"Oh, that reminds me. The portraits down this corridor." Ginger Pie looked over her shoulder. "I think it was around 1900. I had a fight with my father and ran away from my home in the sticks. Back when I just became a dancer in Saubreme, there was a girl who suddenly disappeared. She looked like the popular Blue Rose, Queen Coco. People called her the Downtown Blue Rose, and men were all over her. If only she were here, she could play the role of Queen Coco much better than the two young actresses we have at the moment. Oops, I shouldn't be mean to them." She shrugged.

"What was her name?" Victorique asked, suddenly interested. "And how did she disappear? Is it unsolved like the case with Cordelia Gallo?"

Ginger Pie shook her head. "I forgot her name. People just called her Miss Blue Rose. Oh, wait. I remember now. Nicole Leroux. Her disappearance was a little different, though. Aaah! A unicorn!"

Inspector Grevil de Blois had just opened the door and entered. Indeed, his golden, pointy hair looked like the horn of a beast. He was looking around, dragging his heavy suitcase, when he noticed Victorique standing in the corridor.

"There you are, my cursed sister." He shuffled to her with a face full of rage. "Stop wandering around, you mean, torturous machine!"

"Sister?!" Ginger Pie exclaimed. "This unicorn is your brother? So that means..."

"We're half-siblings!" Victorique's roar reverberated throughout the theater.

Inspector Blois and Ginger Pie covered their ears, blinking repeatedly.

"I figured," Ginger Pie muttered.

"In other words, this man and my mother are completely unrelated."

Inspector Blois put on a scowl. "It was you who told me to wear this hairdo, though," he mumbled.

“All cast, gather around!” a theater staff called. “It’s time for the final rehearsal. Let’s go! Chop chop!”

Ginger Pie quickly rolled up her dress, revealing her shapely calves. Exuding a sex appeal uncharacteristic of the Queen Mother, she scurried away.

“I didn’t get to ask her about Nicole Leroux,” Victorique mumbled as she watched the woman go.

Inspector Blois grabbed her arm and started walking.

“Where are we going?” Victorique asked.

“Your left cheek is stretched like dough. Did you pull it yourself? Only the left side? Why?”

Victorique pressed her palms against her face and pushed her cheek back.

Inspector Blois strode down the corridor. Victorique, stumbling as she was dragged along, saw the beautiful portrait of her mother taken a long time ago.

Shadowy, but gentle eyes. A youthful, radiant smile. Life in rosy hues.

“Wh-Where are you taking me, you unicorn?!”

“To the Ministry of the Occult’s fortress, spongy cheeks.”

“Call me that again, and I won’t cooperate.”

“When it comes to matters related to the storm, I’m afraid you don’t have a choice.” Inspector Blois went straight down the corridor.

Soon, a dark spiral staircase leading to the basement came into view. The swirling darkness had an eerie power, making the hearts of those who came tremble. Victorique and the suitcase squirmed as they were dragged into the abyss.

There was an open area in front of the spiral staircase, where large stage props were placed. Victorique, smoking her pipe, stopped.

Noticing the curious look on her face, Inspector Blois said, “The royal palace and the country house.”

“I see.” Victorique nodded softly.

To the left was the interior of an ornate Rococo-style building with scrollworked columns, gilded incense burners, and sculptures of goddesses. The royal palace, most likely. On the right was a cozy building with modest French windows, a simple dresser, and lace curtains. The Queen’s country house that was built in the suburbs.

“Quite the contrast,” Victorique remarked. “The palace is luxurious, while the country house seems quieter and more comfortable.”

“Let’s go! Ah, the dove!”

Inspector Blois glowered at the white dove that was beating its wings on Victorique’s head like it was a messenger from hell.

The Blois siblings glared at each other for a moment. Then they looked away at the same time, and resumed walking.

Climbing down the spiral staircase, they arrived at the basement of the theater.

It must’ve been used as an entertainment hall in the past. Old lamps flickered on the stone walls, and a dusty chandelier illuminated the low ceiling dimly. To the right of the hall was a man-made pond, with a large lion, similar to the one at the entrance to the theater, spitting out water through its open mouth. Wax figures of half-naked women floated and sank in the pond. When Victorique closed her eyes, band music, merry laughter, the clinking of glasses, and even the women’s charming voices seemed to ring in her ears from beyond time, from the period of wild frenzy.

Like a lonely old man’s dream at dawn.

The hall had long since stopped accommodating guests. On the small stage on the other side of the pond, a dusty scarlet curtain hung halfway down, and a pile of unused tables and chairs for the audience were piled up against the wall.

In the middle of the hall were new desks and chairs that were only recently brought in. Men in black were gathered there, moving around silently, organizing piles of papers that seemed out-of-place in this establishment built for entertainment.

When they noticed Victorique and Inspector Blois entering, the men silently made way for them.

“I see,” Victorique grunted.

Inspector Blois shuddered.

“I didn’t know the ministry had a fortress here. Interesting.”

Inspector Blois snorted. “You don’t even know the concept of interest, you little, bored fiend.”

“Shut up. Or I’ll sick the dove at you.”

Inspector Blois let out a yelp.

At the end of the path that the men opened was a middle-aged man sitting on a chair. Victorique stopped in her tracks. The man exuded an extremely eerie aura, like billowing black smoke.

But she wasn't surprised, as though she had expected to meet the man here. Her green eyes flickered listlessly.

"Albert de Blois. We finally meet."

"I thought I smelled a beast. So it was my daughter," the man—Marquis Albert de Blois—muttered, wrinkling his fine nose.

His cruel lips quivered. The eyes behind his monocle were narrowed. His gaze pierced the little Gray Wolf, the fruit of his long-term plot, like a bullet.

Victorique, holding her pipe in one hand, staggered momentarily. Then she bit her lip and stared back at her father.

Marquis de Blois was wearing a silver rosary, a coat the color of night, and shiny pointed boots that gleamed viciously. The cross glittering on his chest seemed like a ghastly symbol. It was as if the man was claiming that he did not believe in God, only in the wonders of the world. Because a man without a conscience cannot possibly believe in God.

The man who brought Victorique into the world as Europe's ultimate weapon, Marquis Albert de Blois, a leading figure in the Ministry of the Occult.

"It looks like the storm is finally coming," he said curtly.

Victorique's icy expression turned even colder. She cast her gaze down, her green eyes misting up.

"Therefore, I'm ordering you to find out the truth behind the murder of Queen Coco, the greatest mystery in the history of Sauville, which has remained unsolved for ten years."

"Ten years had passed. No one can possibly know what happened."

"Your intellect crosses even the boundaries of time. The Ministry of the Occult is aware of that. There's no point in hiding it."

Victorique took a step back. "I had my suspicions in the carriage on the way here. Why do you, or rather the Ministry of the Occult, want to know who killed Queen Coco? It was a major incident, to be sure, but a lot of time has passed since then. What does this have to do with the next storm and the power of the Ministry?"

The Marquis chuckled.

“My conclusion was: you already know, or rather have a guess, as to who the culprit is,” she continued. “It’s not their identity that you want me to deduce. It’s why they did it and how. In short, the motive and method behind the murder. You want to have dirt on the culprit.”

“You really are a fascinating beast.” His laughter shook the chilly air.

“I doubt there are that many dignitaries you would want dirt on, who were also close to the queen. Your target must be quite the big shot.”

“Hahaha.”

“A Sauville dignitary targeted by the Ministry of the Occult. A murderer who killed Queen Coco using an unclear method and still holds power over the kingdom.”

“...”

“No way. Don’t tell me...”

Victorique put her hand to her cheek and glared at her father with a pale face. The pipe in her other hand quivered.

Marquis de Blois recrossed his legs. The rosary on his chest swayed, glowing a dull silver under the light of the lanterns.

They climbed up the spiral staircase and stopped in front of the stage props.

“Around the year 1900, Queen Coco, unable to get accustomed to the luxurious lifestyle in the palace, left Saubreme and moved to the suburbs.” Marquis de Blois pointed to the country house prop. “She had this country house built for her.”

A hammer sounded from somewhere, shaking the floor faintly with each pounding. The lanterns swayed, their light advancing and receding on the floor like waves.

“Queen Coco, who seldom left the suburbs, garnered the sympathy of the public. There were even rumors that she was depressed because her child died while she was giving birth. For the next fourteen years, until the storm—the Great War—came, the queen lived in seclusion without returning to the palace.”

“Hmm,” Victorique groaned.

“There were a lot of rumors in the city, but none of them seemed credible. I knew Queen Coco personally, and she wasn’t the type to indulge in the nightlife. She was shy, timid, and as meek as a sleeping bird.”

“I see.”

“Soon an ominous wind blew over the world. Spring of 1914, right around the start of the Great War. Queen Coco visited the royal palace. It was the first time in fourteen years since she returned, so the place was very busy.”

“Why?”

“A messenger from France had arrived. He wanted to talk to the queen about something. His Majesty the King said it would be uncouth to invite him to the country house, so he sent a carriage to fetch the Queen and bring her to the palace.”

All eyes went from the country house prop to the extravagant royal palace. The gilded furniture and luxurious fabrics arrested attention.

“Apparently there was a visitor at the country house at the time, but they missed the queen. We’ll go back to the visitor later.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, Queen Coco was shown to a room in the palace, where she died just before meeting the French envoy. Correction: murdered. There was only one entrance to the room, and His Majesty Rupert was seen entering it and coming out immediately.”

“I see. So the king did it.”

“But the king was empty-handed when he entered and when he left. According to the king’s own testimony, Queen Coco was still alive at the time. But a few minutes later, when the French envoy entered the room, they saw the gruesome, headless body of Queen Coco.”

The wind whistled. It must have come through a door or a window. The white dove that Victorique was holding in front of her cooed.

One corner of the Marquis’ lips curved into a sinister smile. “That wasn’t all!”

“Hmm.”

“Around the same time, in a country house far away, Queen Coco’s severed head appeared. The visitors and the servants were certain about what they saw. Floating in the air, her head was just as pale as when she was alive, her expression forlorn. And her eyes were tightly closed. A drop of red blood flowed from the corner of her eye, then the head suddenly burst into flames, falling to the floor.”

“I see. So it’s sort of being in two places at once. One person appears in two different places at about the same time. In this case, her torso was in the palace, while her head was in the country house.”

Marquis de Blois’ eyes gleamed coldly. “One thing that bothers me is that one of the visitors at the country house was Jupiter Roget. Needless to say, he’s the president of the Academy of Science and is on good terms with the king.”

“Hmm.”

“But the fact that even Roget, a believer in science, saw the severed head, ironically adds credibility to the testimony.”

“I see. So His Majesty Rupert is more deeply involved in this case than expected.”

The suitcase that Inspector Blois, standing behind Victorique and Marquis Albert de Blois, had dragged here, had been shaking for a while now. The shaking grew fiercer the moment the Marquis mentioned the burning head. Suddenly, the suitcase burst open.

Hearing the sound, everyone looked back. Ms. Cecile popped out of the suitcase. She had taken off her round glasses, holding them in her hands.

“Severed head! Torso! Noooo!”

Marquis de Blois swiftly jumped away from the suitcase, letting out a yelp that was somewhere between a shriek and an angry roar.

Saubreme’s cityscape, where the old and new coexisted like longtime enemies, was a mix of majestic buildings adorned with sculptures of medieval knights and mythical goddesses overlooking the streets, and shiny new buildings made of glass and steel.

Roofed carriages and state-of-the-art automobiles passed each other on the huge intersection in the middle of the city, whistles blowing and horns blaring.

A two-seater motorbike sped through the road, weaving to the right and then to the left. Startled, the officer standing in the middle of the intersection forgot to blow his whistle, and just stared at it for a while.

“Be careful, Mademoiselle,” he warned diffidently.

The driver was a young, red-haired woman with a voluptuous body. A worn kitchen apron was peeking out from under her coat for some reason. The young boy behind her, completely still like a wax sculpture, seemed to be East Asian, with jet-black hair glistening under the winter sun. His eyes

were tightly shut, his lips pale. He was holding a pure-white rabbit in his chest for reasons unknown. Like the boy, the creature too had its eyes closed. Ears folded, it was curled up and frozen like a stuffed animal.

The odd motorbike meandered through the intersection and slowly disappeared in the direction of the Phantom Theater.

The baffled officer sighed, his shimmering breath turning pure-white.

“We’re here! That was a long ride.”

“Yeah. Thank you, God, Buddha, and my ancestors across the sea, for keeping me safe! I thought I was a goner. Over and over.”

Pressing his palms together, praying, making the sign of the cross, Kazuya got off on the pavement, not in front of the Phantom Theater, but a little past it, as the driver was a little late in applying the brakes.

Sophie, the dorm mother, dismounted gracefully. “I can’t believe we made it in one piece!” she said proudly.

“First, I would like to ask the government of Sauville why they gave such a reckless driver a driver’s license. Next, the owner of the motorbike shop why they sold you one. While a capitalist society is prosperous, it’s also full of inconsistencies.”

“License? What’s that?” Sophie placed her hands on her hips and took a deep breath.

“License? What’s that?” Kazuya parroted. He turned to Sophie, and with the same sternness as his father, he said, “So you don’t have a license.”

“And I’m asking you, what’s a license?”

“Listen carefully. You need government permission to drive this thing.” Pointing at Sophie and the motorbike, he began giving her a lecture, waving his forefinger around. “You study, take the written exam, take driving lessons, and pass the practical driving test. You skipped over everything.”

“Oh, stop being so finicky.” Sophie rubbed the little imperial soldier’s head. “I used to ride my father’s mules when I was young, and I’ve driven wagons and carriages. Sure, there were some injuries involved, but nobody died. And besides, this motorbike isn’t even mine.”

“What?!” Kazuya shrieked, pressing his hands on his cheeks. “Who’s the owner, then?”

“The school chairman!” Sophie scratched the back of her head. “He was so happy that he finally got a motorbike last week. He drove it around the

campus during class hours. Oh, it was class hours, so I guess you don't know about it."

"Of course not! So you stole the bike. Oh, no. What do I do? I'm an accomplice. I'm definitely getting deported this time. I'm supposed to be carrying my country's reputation, but I keep getting involved in all sorts of incidents, the latest one being theft."

"As long as I return it to his garage tonight, he won't notice. Now let's go to the ticket office!" Sophie broke into a run.

Kazuya, still holding the rabbit, ran after her. "We're not done yet!"

Just then, two middle-aged men alighted from an elegant carriage parked along the road.

One was classy, dressed in a fine cashmere coat, hat, shiny shoes, and holding a walking stick. He wore his hat so low that it was difficult to make out his features. The other man had the air of a government official. He was wearing a functional coat and shoes. As they walked towards the theater, the classy man and Sophie bumped into each other. The government official pushed Sophie away with a bark, and she yelped.

"Oh, it's just a woman."

Sophie got up grumpily.

"I'm sorry about that," the classy man said. "Are you all right, Mademoiselle?" He smiled, extending his hand.

Sophie smiled back. "I'm fine. It was also my fault for running. Sorry, gramps!" She sprinted away again.

"Wait up!" Kazuya called after her.

"Whaaat?!" Sophie exclaimed, sinking to the floor by the theater's ticket window.

Startled by her voice, the two men, who were about to enter the theater, stopped in their tracks.

"What's the matter?" one of them asked.

"Tickets are sold out."

The man laughed. "Why, of course. It's a popular show, and it's the first day. You should give up and come back tomorrow. They might have same-day tickets."

"Hmm..."

Unable to bear seeing Sophie dejected, the classy man reached into his pocket. Behind his hat, his lips twisted faintly. A smile.

Kazuya braced himself, for in that moment, the man looked as cold and terrifying as a gangster taking out a gun.

Who in the world is this man?

But what came out of his pocket was not a gun, but a ticket. A gentle smile appeared on his cheeks, hidden deep behind his hat.

“I have an extra ticket, if you don’t mind sitting next to a couple of old men.”

“Really? Thanks, gramps!”

“Now listen here,” the other man said. “Do you not know who this man is? You will address him pro—”

“It’s all right, Roget.”

“But, Sir.”

“We’re undercover today. So keep it down.”

“I understand.”

The classy man smiled, tipped his hat, and walked into the theater. Roget quickly followed him.

A car horn blared in the distance. Pedestrians walked briskly, hurrying to their destinations.

The rabbit escaped from Kazuya’s arms. Scurrying across the cobblestone pavement, it went after the men, following them inside the theater.

“Wait, little bunny!” Kazuya chased after it.

The doorman blinked in surprise. He tried to stop Kazuya, but he was so overwhelmed by the sight of him chasing the rabbit that he let him through.

“Wait!” Kazuya barged into the dim theater all by himself.

Inside the theater was a spacious area covered with a red carpet. Actors in glamorous costumes, and busy backstage staff in dirty shirts and rolled-up sleeves made for a rather bizarre scene.

“Little bunny!”

Kazuya stumbled after the rabbit as it jumped into the dark, narrow corridor beside the hall.

Lanterns illuminated the somber corridor. The walls were filled with the portraits of dancers, women who were no longer around. It was like the theater’s past turned into a picture album. All of them were beautiful,

adorned with extravagant costumes and heavy make-up, smiling in Kazuya's direction.

As he ran further down, he spotted a figure up ahead.

A huge woman was peering at a pocket watch peeking out of her bosom. She was wearing an antiquated dress and an extravagant tiara on her head. The woman looked wonderful, but she seemed unsteady, like her feet were a few inches off the floor. Her large tiara gleamed under the light of the lanterns.

Kazuya, thinking it was the Queen Mother he had seen in portraits, stopped in his tracks. But when the woman saw the rabbit running toward her, she smiled and picked it up.

"Oh! What a yummy-looking rabbit. So round and fat. I wanna sautee it in butter."

"Huh?" Hearing her common manner of speaking, Kazuya tilted his head in wonder.

She looks just like the Queen Mother, but maybe it's not her. Plus, there's no way the real one would be here.

The woman grinned. "Surprised? I'm an actress here. I bet you thought I was the real Queen Mother, huh?"

"I-I did." Kazuya nodded as he took back the rabbit and held it in front of his chest. "You look so much alike."

Smiling, the woman said, "Of course. I'm an actress, after all. But my plain face doesn't look anything like her. It's the power of make-up. Although..."

She pointed at the portrait of a woman on the wall. It was labeled 1899, with the name Nicole Leroux written on it.

She was looking at Kazuya with a big smile on her face, like she was having so much fun. The photo was so vivid that it seemed like she would come out of the portrait at any moment and pull his hand for a dance.

The woman smiled fondly. "She was different."

"Who is she?" Kazuya asked.

"Nicole Leroux. She was known as the Downtown Blue Rose. She was a very popular dancer over twenty years ago. We're just merry country girls, so when we talk, we reveal our true selves. But this girl actually looked like Queen Coco, the Blue Rose of Sauville, when she was silent. She could have played the role of the Blue Rose with only a little bit of make-up."

“Is she not around anymore?”

“No. Which reminds me, I was going to talk about her to another kid earlier.”

The large woman—Ginger Pie—tugged at the rabbit’s ears, and Kazuya’s as well.

“Around twenty-four years ago, in the year 1900,” she began, “Nicole found a weird newspaper ad.”

“A newspaper ad?”

“Yes. And then...”

Sounds of a scuffle came from the shadows at the end of the corridor.

Though curious about the noise, Kazuya listened to the woman’s story.

The rabbit in his arms had its ears perked up, as though listening as well.

Meanwhile, at the end of the corridor, where the props were placed...

Ms. Cecile, who had popped out of the suitcase, wearing nothing but a light-brown woolen hat and a coat over her nightgown, and Marquis Albert de Blois, were staring at each other quizzically.

“Who are you?” the Marquis asked. “You look like a dull-witted woman I’ve seen before.”

“Ah, what a horrifying face! The Grim Reaper! Wait, Marquis Blois?”

“Oh, are you the brainless teacher from St. Marguerite Academy?”

“You’ve got the wrong person. I’m smart.”

“Throw her out.”

Casting Ms. Cecile a sidelong glance, Marquis de Blois made a motion of shooing a fly away.

Ms. Cecile’s face turned crimson, and her cheeks puffed up like balloons. “I’m not going anywhere! If I plant my feet firmly... Aaaah!” She flailed about.

“What on earth are you doing?” asked the Marquis’s son, Inspector Blois, flabbergasted. “Unless you’re a corpse, ladies shouldn’t be hiding inside a suitcase. It’s weird.”

“I was just worried about Victorique. You usually keep her locked up in the academy, but out of nowhere you brought her here. It’s fishy.”

“Get out of here!” Inspector Blois slammed the suitcase shut.

Ignoring the shrill voice coming from inside, he dragged the suitcase out into the corridor. It bounced up and down as if it were alive. Each time it jerked around, Inspector Blois yelped.

Victorique watched in silence as she smoked her pipe. A moment later, she shuffled over to the suitcase. The dove on her head wobbled from side to side.

“Cecile,” she called.

Her voice was terribly quiet, like a lone traveler from the future who knew in advance all the terrible things that were about to happen. In her green eyes lurked resignation that only a witness to a lot of things could have.

“?”

“You should listen to Grevil and go home. It’s too dangerous.”

“?! ”

“I don’t want you getting dragged into this. Do you understand?”

“... ”

“Whether you’re here or not, I can never return to the academy unless I solve this mystery.”

“... ”

“Cecile?”

The suitcase started crying. Muted, heartbreaking sobs came from inside. The huge suitcase shook, and Inspector Blois dragged it again. It bounced around still, slamming its edges at the inspector’s shin.

The white dove perched on top of Victorique’s head cooed again. It spread its tiny wings and flew down the corridor.

Horried, Victorique went after it. “Hey, wait!”

Chasing the bird entrusted to her by her mother, she quickly overtook Inspector Blois, who was struggling with the rampaging suitcase, heading down the corridor to the entrance.

“Get back here!”

Hearing a familiar, deep voice from afar, Kazuya lifted his head. He was chasing after the rabbit that had jumped out of his arms and started running further down the corridor as soon as he finished listening to Ginger Pie’s story.

Kazuya and Victorique bumped into each other in the middle of the corridor.

Kazuya’s face lit up like a flower blooming. “Victorique! I’ve been looking for you,” he said. “I can’t believe I found you right away.”

Victorique's eyes, however, widened in shock, and then darkened, like the moon hiding behind the clouds.

"Kujou!" she exclaimed. "Not you too."

The fear lurking deep inside her cold eyes slowly crept across her whole face.

Seeing her expression, Kazuya swallowed. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing."

"Should I have stayed away? I got a letter from Ms. Cecile. She said that Inspector Blois was taking you away to some theater in Saubreme. I would have come sooner, but the motorbike got stuck in a ridge and crashed into a shed. As we got closer to the city, we got into a race with cars driven by young nobles, so we ended up taking a different route. Hmm? Are you okay? Your cheeks are deflated."

"Kujou." Victorique perched the dove on her shoulder.

Wearing a red-and-white dress fringed with ruffles and laces, she looked like a luxurious porcelain doll. Her mini-hat and shoes were a lovely pink. She was a tiny rose in full bloom. Her golden hair, like the tail of an ancient creature, hung softly to the floor. It stirred softly, glistening, as though imbued with a mysterious power. In her pudgy hand was a ceramic pipe. Her face was as expressionless as ever, but there was pain in her eyes.

"This case is dangerous," she said firmly. "You should stay out of it."

"I won't," Kazuya replied instantly in a soft voice.

Victorique blinked in surprise.

Kazuya crossed his arms. "I will get myself involved in every case you find yourself in. I spoke with your father, Marquis de Blois, in Beelzebub's Skull, and I faced Brian Roscoe, the Gray Wolf, in the academy's clock tower. I'm already caught in the karmic cycle that revolves around you, and I'm not afraid of it. I care about you more than anything."

"But... You can't..."

"You're kind-hearted. And surprisingly timid, despite spending your days swimming through an ocean of books. You're afraid of dragging people close to you into trouble."

"..."

"Surely having at least one person to stay by your side is fine. A nosy friend who's willing to get involved in everything you do. An ordinary guy who will, nonetheless, try to protect you. Just one will do."

“...Kujou.”

“Oh, by the way.” Kazuya pointed down the corridor. Either something had caught his attention, or he was trying to change the subject. “Do you know about the Downtown Blue Rose?”

“Hmm? What is that?” Victorique, caught unawares, regarded him blankly.

Kazuya trotted back down the corridor and pointed at a portrait of Nicole Leroux hanging on the wall.

Her smile seemed even brighter than earlier. Behind her lips, coated with lipstick, glinted what looked like a gold tooth.

“A woman dressed as the Queen Mother told me something about this lady,” Kazuya said.

“Ginger Pie, I take it.”

“Yeah. Anyway.” Kazuya cocked his head curiously. “Nicole Leroux was a very popular dancer in the theater until about 1900. One day, she found a weird newspaper ad.”

“Go on.”

“‘Secretary wanted!’ was what it said. But the physical requirements were very specific. Blonde hair, blue eyes, good-looking. Height around 160 centimeters. There was even something about a shoe size. Nicole said, ‘What an odd employer. Maybe they’re a pervert? But I fit the requirements.’ She laughed out loud. She then did an imitation of Cinderella, inserting her feet in some shoes, and sang and danced on the spot.”

“Hmm.”

“She was apparently a cheerful and spirited person. So the other dancers joined her, playing the part of the prince, the stepmother, and the mean sisters, and they had a fun time in the green room. Ginger Pie says she remembers it like it was just yesterday.”

“But there’s more, right?”

“Yup.” Kazuya nodded. “Nicole went in for the interview, partly as a joke, because the pay was really good. She said, ‘I don’t know if a dancer like me is capable of being a prim secretary.’ Then she disappeared after that. She didn’t come home or to the theater. She had a lot of boyfriends,

but they never got to see her again. They missed her so bad. Strange, isn't it?"

Victorique nodded.

Inspector Blois slowly passed by, dragging the still-shaking suitcase. Veins had popped out on his forehead.

The inspector gave Kazuya a sharp glare. "Fancy meeting you here, Kujou."

"What are you doing with a living suitcase? And it hates you. First of all, you look like a degenerate."

"Oh, shut it. Ah, it's so heavy."

The suitcase jumped again. He kicked it, then heaved a deep sigh.

An idea came to Victorique. She slammed her fist onto her palm. "Kujou."

"What? Do you need my help with something? I can stand in front of you and protect you from weird perverts like him with all I've got."

"I can hear you, you know," Inspector Blois growled.

"Oops!" Kazuya shrank back. "I can be your bulletproof jacket. I'll bring you candies. And I'll bring the princess mysterious stories to keep her occupied." He swung one arm in a bow.

Victorique nodded in agreement. "It just so happens that I'm currently bored."

"Really?"

"Yes. So go and find out more about this strange story. Leave the theater right now and head for the streets."

"Got it! No, wait just a darn minute." Kazuya eyed her dubiously. "Are you trying to get rid of me? You don't want me staying around because it's dangerous."

A faint scowl flashed across Victorique's face, then disappeared the next instant, replaced by the usual blank, doll-like expression.

"That's not it," she said.

"I doubt it. Can you swear on your mother?"

"Shut up, you hack!"

"H-Hack?" Shocked, Kazuya fell silent.

"I'm just a little bit curious about Nicole Leroux's disappearance," Victorique hissed. "Go look into it. And take Cecile with you."

"All right, then. Wait, did you say Ms. Cecile? Where is she?"

Kazuya looked around, but all he saw in the corridor were Victorique, himself, and the portraits of dancers on the wall. And then there was Inspector Blois moving further away, pulling a weird, rattling suitcase.

Victorique shook her head grimly and pointed straight ahead. "Isn't it obvious? Inside the suitcase, where else?"

"Whaaat?!" Kazuya exclaimed, leaning back.

The white dove cooed.

The sky was so clear, the afternoon sun shining brightly on the streets, that it was hard to believe it was winter.

Cars and roofed carriages passed by, horns blaring and hoofs clattering. Pedestrians crowded the pavements, and gorgeous items filled the display windows of various stores. It was your typical, bustling Sunday.

The door of the Phantom Theater, shaped in the mouth of a huge lion, opened, and Inspector Blois appeared. His golden drill glinted under the sun, catching the attention of passersby. The suitcase he tossed onto the pavement rolled into the distance.

Kazuya Kujou came running out of the door after him. "Teach!" he called as he stumbled after the suitcase. A white rabbit followed him behind.

Passersby exchanged glances, smiling and shrugging as they continued walking. They thought the little oriental boy had mistakenly used the wrong word for suitcase.

"Teach!"

The suitcase finally rolled to a stop. Kazuya ran over to it and pried it open.

Ms. Cecile popped out from inside. She was wearing her round glasses, and a woolen hat sat atop her shoulder-length brown hair, a little tilted to the side.

"Oh, you were actually inside." Kazuya stepped back in surprise.

Ms. Cecile seemed to be in a sour mood. She emerged from the suitcase like a bear awakening from its long hibernation. Placing her hands on her hips, she glared at the entrance to the theater.

"Hey!"

But there was no one there anymore.

The lion's mouth was tightly shut, its two large eyes staring at their direction. The wind whistled, carrying a dry leaf across the pavement.

"Huh? Where'd they go?" Ms. Cecile said, disappointed.

"Teach! How did you end up inside the suitcase? Who put you in there?! How could they treat a young lady so roughly?! It was the inspector, wasn't it? In that case, I'll go lodge a complaint. This is inexcusable!"

"Uh, no. Actually..." Ms. Cecile suddenly blushed like a lit candle. She went after Kazuya and stopped him.

"What is it? I'm just gonna give him a piece of my mind. What, I can't? Why are you shaking your head so much? Okay, then. If you really don't want me to."

Kazuya went silent. A horn sounded. Footsteps of passersby clicked loudly.

After a moment's silence, Kazuya said, "Did you enter the suitcase yourself?"

"O-Of course not! A young lady wouldn't do that! What are you talking about? That's so stupid."

Kazuya went quiet again.

Ms. Cecile looked around, trying to change the subject. "How about we have lunch in that café?"

"A café? Sure, I guess. But we have a serious situation at hand."

"We're going to have a strategy meeting."

"Ah, I see." Kazuya nodded.

Ms. Cecile pulled him to a small café in the corner of the street. The rabbit hopped after them.

"Nicole Leroux? Weird newspaper ad?" Cecile said as she took a big bite of her sandwich that was about the size of her face.

Kazuya nodded. A shrimp cooked in herbs fell out of the sandwich and bounced on the white plate like it was still alive.

Ms. Cecile stuck a fork in it and brought it to her mouth. "Does it really have anything to do with this case?" she wondered. "But Victorique asked you to look into it."

"Yeah." Kazuya nodded vigorously. "But what exactly is the case this time?"

“That’s the thing. I was hiding in the suitcase, so... I mean, I was locked inside. I could only hear bits and pieces.” Ms. Cecile swallowed the shrimp. “Victorique’s father, Marquis de Blois, is apparently the one behind this. He was waiting in the basement of the theater. I don’t know the exact details, but he told Victorique about a murder case.”

“Was someone killed?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Don’t you know about it? Ten years ago, Coco Rose, the Queen of Sauville, was murdered in the palace. It caused a huge uproar. The culprit has yet to be caught, and we don’t even know how they killed her.”

“I’ve heard about that.”

“I don’t know why Marquis de Blois wants her to solve that case now.”

Kazuya cocked his head. “But that doesn’t answer why Victorique is asking us to look into Nicole Leroux, the Downtown Blue Rose.”

“Yeah. Well, let’s look into it anyway. I’m sure we can assist her in a way. She said she can’t return to the academy until she solves the case.”

“Okay, then.” Kazuya nodded.

Ms. Cecile gently peered into his face. He looked calm, but a closer look revealed firm determination, as though he had resolved to do all he could to face an immeasurably powerful force that was history, a forest so vast it was impossible to see the whole thing.

Kazuya stood up. “Well, then.” He tried to sound as cheerful as possible. “First, let’s check out some documents.”

Ms. Cecile quickly got up as well. “Good idea. I’ll do my best.”

The sun slid behind the clouds, and the temperature seemed to drop. Their shoulders hunched from the chill. Pedestrians had their collars up as well.

They examined old newspaper articles in the Royal Library located on the main street, right across the theater.

Using the information they found, they hurried to the screening site mentioned in the ad.

“Wait, Kujou!” Ms. Cecile was already short of breath. “I’m wearing a nightgown under my coat!”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Kazuya said. “I should’ve been more thoughtful. Wait, a nightgown? Why?”

“Actually, it doesn’t matter. I’m just exhausted.”

Kazuya stopped and waited for Ms. Cecile. The rabbit followed spiritedly, hopping.

The venue was on the sixth floor of an old building. There was no elevator, and the stairs were very steep, but Kazuya climbed up without much effort.

“How do you have so much stamina?” Ms Cecile asked.

Kazuya slammed his fist onto his palm. “I climb up the library tower in the academy every day. Up and up to the top floor, until my thighs become sore.”

“I see. You go ahead, then. I’ll take my time.”

“Okay.”

The sixth floor was like a deserted warehouse that no one had used for a long time. There was only an old desk and three chairs in the middle of the room, nothing else. Piles of dust stung Kazuya’s eyes.

Kazuya asked the building’s manager about the place.

“I don’t know anything about it,” the manager said, “but there’s an accounting firm a floor below that’s been around for a long time. There might be someone there who remembers what happened back then.”

He went to the fifth floor and asked around politely. Then, an office staff who was somewhere between middle-aged and a senior citizen said, “Are you talking about what happened 24 years ago?”

“I know it was a long time ago, so you might not remember much.”

“Nonsense. I remember that day well.”

“Really?”

Ms. Cecile had just arrived at the fifth floor. Kazuya, together with her, listened to what the old staff had to say.

“The requirement was young, with blonde hair and blue eyes? Ah, that explains it.”

The staff served tea and sat down across from the old sofa where Kazuya and Ms. Cecile were seated.

The windowpanes were sooty and cracked in places. The mountains of documents on the cabinet suggested a hefty number of clients. The phone rang occasionally, and someone would pick it up.

The tea was delicious. Nodding, Kazuya listened carefully.

“I still remember. There was a long queue of young blondes on these stairs that ran from the first to the sixth floor. I didn’t realize that they all had blue eyes. It was blinding. I like pretty, blonde girls myself, but seeing so many of them at once, and all crammed on a narrow staircase, was suffocating. Ah, but they were pretty, all right. Young and full of spirit. When they chatted with each other, it was like golden birds chirping in unison.”

The staff cast the door a distant look. Kazuya and Ms. Cecile followed his gaze.

It felt like the spectacle that morning twenty-four years ago was still there. Women with blonde hair that glittered like the sun, filling the stairs of the multi-purpose building up to the sixth floor like a gathering of mythical goddesses.

A scene that endured the test of time. Drifting across a sea of memories.

“I always thought it was an audition for a job, like an actress or a singer,” the staff continued delightedly. “After all, they all looked pretty much the same, and from the conversations I overheard, the pay was really good. Three times what I was earning back then. I had no idea they were looking for a secretary. That sounds very strange.”

“Hair color, eye color, age, height. Even the shoe size was specified,” Kazuya said.

“Hmm. That Roget guy sounds odd, all right.”

“Roget?!” Kazuya exclaimed.

The staff and Ms. Cecile jumped.

“There was a man by that name on the sixth floor?!”

“Y-Yeah.” The staff nodded. “It was weird. Until the day before, the sixth floor had been unoccupied for a long time. The stairs are steep, it’s hot in summer and cold in winter. It’s not an ideal place for an office. But then one morning a signboard for their office appeared out of nowhere, and then there was a crowd of pretty blondes on the stairs. Naturally, I got curious.” He tilted his head. “Then by evening, they finally finished interviewing everyone. The army of beautiful women disappeared, except for one. Apparently, she was selected as the secretary.”

“Was her name Nicole?”

“I’m not sure.” The staff searched through his memories. Then his eyes lit up. “Ah, yes. It was Nicole! I’d forgotten all this time. I heard it when

they were coming down the stairs and passed by our office. She happened to have the same name as my cousin in the countryside, so it caught my attention.”

Kazuya and Ms. Cecile looked at each other.

“I knew it,” Kazuya mumbled. “Nicole Leroux found the ad, applied for a secretary position, got the job, and then disappeared. The recruiters must have done something to her.”

“Yeah,” Cecile nodded.

The staff pointed toward the door. “The frosted glass on the door there was transparent back then. I glanced three or four men, all of them wearing fine suits. Their splendid attire made you wonder what they were doing in a building like this. They looked like people involved in the royal court or the government, basically.”

“And you remember one of them?”

“Yes. They called him Roget. Apparently, he was the boss. The other men gathered around him, asking for instructions.”

“Roget,” Kazuya murmured. “That was probably Jupiter Roget, the president of the Academy of Science. He’s also close with the King of Sauville. Sworn enemy of Marquis de Blois and the Ministry of the Occult.” He looked at the door.

It felt like Jupiter Roget and the men of the Science Academy, hiring Nicole Leroux for some kind of a plot, were passing by at this very moment. He thought he could see the Downtown Blue Rose’s bright, playful, always-spirited, yet thin and ephemeral figure.

Like a mirage, it shimmered and vanished.

Kazuya was deep in thought, his face hard.

“What does this mean? How is the Academy of Science involved in this case?”

Outside, the winter sun shone softly on the streets.

Mechanical Turk 2

I could hear a solemn hymn drifting in from somewhere.

The stone tower's dirty floor and cracked walls were freezing cold. The chains stretching from my wrists rattled.

Is it almost Christmas? I can hear lovely voices far in the distance, singing Joy to the World.

"Is the drug working?"

I heard a deep voice. I opened my eyes softly. The melodious voice instantly faded away like a mirage.

Someone was studying me as I lay on the shabby bed.

Narrowed, green eyes were examining me.

"Yes," said the doctor. "She should stay put for a while."

"Will this Gray Wolf give birth soon?"

"In the next few days. Will you be around?"

"Ha! You jest."

The man threw his head back and laughed, as if hearing a funny joke. I heard another hymn from the distance. I was falling into a deep valley of slumber.

The cold wind howled.

So stop crying!

Cordelia!

Life in rosy hues, remember?

Are you listening? You're such a crybaby.

No matter how lonely you get, no matter how many walls you put up around you.

You're not alone, unfortunately.

You come to the theater, you'll have us, your fellow dancers.

They will come through for you.

You even have the cute red-haired boy.

And you know what?

*Right now you're no more than a little child.
But one day your young soul will mature.
And then you'll have big hands to protect the ones you love.
Isn't that nice?
I sound preachy, don't I?
Oh, that's our cue! Let's go!
Life in rosy hues!*

I was dreaming about the old days.

I didn't know how long I slept. It felt like days had passed again. I had no idea what kind of drugs they were giving me, but for a long time now, moments of lucidity were few and far between.

When I opened my eyes, the doctor was there again. Several noble-looking men I hadn't seen before were also looking down at me, their eyes wide with fear.

Strange folks.

I should be the one scared.

One night, I was suddenly kidnapped from the theater, and I'd been here ever since. My fellow dancers, the red-haired boy, everyone who knew me were unaware that I was locked up in here.

"It's about time."

"Goodness!" A nobleman squealed. "Our Father in heaven..." His voice was shaky.

I heard a hymn again.

"How ironic," another added. "Tonight is Christmas."

"Ah, the horror."

They exchanged glances, making the sign of the cross.

The hymns that I'd been hearing for days were not hallucinations, it seemed. Somewhere out there must be a choir of pious girls singing in unison.

"On the night of Christ's birth, a Gray Wolf will be born. Ironic, indeed."

"Ah, I want to get home to my family as soon as possible. It's so cold in here!"

"It's almost time. Soon."

The men looked at me in horror.

The chains holding me down rattled loudly.

A wind mixed with snow battered against the stone tower.

A while later, I felt something coming out of my body, something precious. Something I had carried with me since birth. Cherished.

Banished from my village for a crime I did not commit, with nothing but the gold coin that the village chief tossed to me in my pocket, I went down the mountain alone, terrified of beasts, wandering the town, until I arrived at Saubreme.

All those times, I kept it with me. My soul.

I resisted. The chains shook wildly. And I howled.

Men inside the tower shrieked in horror.

Ahh!

My soul... My soul is leaving my body! Give it back!

Pain, anger, fear. It felt like ages, yet at the same time lasted only an instant.

My soul, the irreplaceable thing inside of me, cried. A voice, sweet and lonely, crying in the darkness for me.

I'd never felt such affection before. The blessing of having something to love pierced through my body like a beam of light.

At the same time, I felt a void in me, as though my body, ripped of its soul, had turned into a hollow, wooden doll.

"It's a girl."

"A female Gray Wolf. No, a little monster with the blood of wolves and the kingdom's nobility."

A daughter!

My daughter!

I reached out my chained hands.

Hands that a fellow dancer, brown-haired, sexy, cheerful, and kind Ginger Pie, said would protect the ones I love. Adult hands.

But they were pale and emaciated like an old woman's, with countless fine veins protruding from the skin. I couldn't even stop the doctors from mercilessly taking my little girl, my soul, away from me. I growled in protest, but only the deep cry of a beast came out, as though the long period of confinement in the tower had made me forget how to speak.

I growled, cried for my daughter.

As though hearing the voice of her mother, the girl cried, her sorrowful voice cutting through the night.

The noblemen rushed to the door. I was alone again. The chains rattled.
Two pale, tiny, powerless arms, like the claws of a scrawny beast, lay
outstretched toward the void.

I screamed.

Please. Please don't take her away. Let my soul stay close to me.

My dear daughter!

I howled, so loudly that the tower shook.

My soul!

I heard another hymn.

Tears flowed like a river, flooding my vision.

Chapter 3: Blue Flame

“It’s almost Christmas.”

“What?”

It was the winter season, but unlike the mountainous areas, there was not a lot of snow on the streets of Saubreme; cars and horse-drawn carriages were running down the roads, which were lined with cold, bare trees, without any problems. Pedestrians’ breaths came out in white puffs.

After turning several alleys from the main street, they arrived at a dim section of town. In contrast to the shops on the main street, the display windows here were lonely and dusty. There was not a lot of people around. But a closer look around revealed numerous fascinating shops—windows filled with Arabian baked goods, an antique camera shop that might have something valuable, a tailor’s shop with wooden mannequins in beckoning poses. Strolling around here would surely make for a pleasant Sunday afternoon.

Kazuya was marching down the street. Ms. Cecile, walking beside him, was fastening the front buttons of her coat and tugging at its bottom to hide the nightgown she was wearing underneath.

“It would be fun to do some Christmas shopping around here,” she said. “I wish Saubreme was right next to the village.”

“I thought you were talking about something important. Christmas? Really? We have more pressing matters at hand.”

“Actually, Kujou. Christmas is also an important day for you.”

“I think we’re here, Teach.”

Kazuya pointed to a shop. Ms. Cecile closed her mouth, but then opened it again, agape. She made a motion of wiping drool with the back of his hand.

The signboard bore a picture of overgrown wheat and freshly-baked bread, and enticing words that read: ‘Sam’s Bakery: Guaranteed Savory!’ On the other side of the glass window sat huge baguettes, soft brioches, and a pile of sandwiches packed with stuffings, a reflection of the cheerful Sam.

“Looks yummy!” Ms. Cecile squealed.

“Let’s talk to this Sam person. Apparently, he was a huge fan of the Downtown Blue Rose.”

“Ah, right.”

Kazuya straightened his back and entered the shop. The bell on the door clinked.

A man, thin as a needle, wearing overalls and a hat of the same color, and a plump lady in an apron, raised their heads.

“Welcome!”

“Guaranteed savory!”

“Um, sorry,” Kazuya said. “We’re not really customers.”

“Hmm? Why are you here, then?”

“We’re actually looking into Nicole Leroux, the Downtown Blue Rose.”

The skinny man—Sam—turned pale as a sheet. His eyes darted to his wife, to Kazuya, to the pile of bread, then back to his wife again.

Swiftly, he pounced at Kazuya. “Ssh! Keep it down, will you? I’m gonna get my ass kicked by my wife!”

“O-Oh, sorry. Um...”

“It’s been ages. More than twenty years. But my wife’s jealousy is as timeless as a classic film or a great piece of music.” He turned to Ms. Cecile. “You! Do me a favor and distract my wife by asking her questions about types of bread.”

He didn’t even need to ask; Ms. Cecile’s eyes were glued to the delicious-looking sandwiches.

She just had a sandwich, Kazuya thought. “I’m counting on you, Teach,” he whispered.

Ms. Cecile made another motion of wiping drool off her mouth. “Leave it to me.” She nodded, then moved closer to the lady. “Excuse me! Do you have any pastrami sandwiches? Are those red lumps in the brioche snakeberries? Or is that raspberry jam?”

“Oh, impressive. Those are indeed snakeberries. You don’t see them in bread a lot.”

“I knew it!”

“You’re no ordinary woman.”

“Hehe. I’m a teacher, so I’m particular about bread. Is this meat pie over here made with pork? Or pheasant?”

Rolling up her sleeves, the lady began explaining things to Ms. Cecile. Kazuya and Sam left the shop quietly.

Sam was walking down the alley with Kazuya, gesturing enthusiastically.

“I was a huge fan,” the man said. “She was so cheerful, and so pretty. Don’t even get me started on her hourglass figure!” He smiled wistfully. “If the real Queen Coco is an artificial Blue Rose...”

“Yes?”

“Then the Downtown Blue Rose is a blue flame! Crackling, burning with love every night. She was the best dancer, the best singer. And she was friendly with her fans who came to see her frequently. She even chatted with me while I was waiting by the stage door. I used to bring her freshly-baked bread. She’d thank me and then take a bite right then and there. She’d smile as she told me how delicious it was.” He pointed to his own face with a knotted finger. “She used to leave crumbs on her cheeks and chin. Young and naive as I was, my heart would beat fast as I removed the crumbs for her. My fingers still remember the warmth of Nicole Leroux’s cheeks. It felt like directly touching her soul. I’m willing to bet that God was watching me at that moment.”

Realizing what he had been saying, Sam scratched his chin in embarrassment. “I was in love with her, basically.” He hung his head. “Twenty-four years had passed. Nicole Leroux and I were still so young back then.”

“So you knew her well.”

“She was a celebrity and I was a fan who came to the theater to watch her perform. That was the extent of our relationship. But she was definitely a great girl. You could see it in her eyes. Bright, heavy drinker, virtuous. I only saw her at night, but she was like the sun. That’s why I still think of her as a flame. It’s what attracted all the men. All the guys downtown liked her way more than the original Blue Rose. Sure, Queen Coco was beautiful and noble, but they didn’t know what she was really like. Who knows, though? She might have been a nice girl too, if they got to know her.”

“I heard that Nicole Leroux was a dancer in Phantom, and she suddenly went missing in the year 1900.”

“She did.” Sam’s face dimmed. “I don’t know the details, but she suddenly stopped performing. I was worried.”

“I see.”

“Why did she have to die? She was so full of life. I still can’t believe she’s gone.”

“...She’s dead?” Kazuya stopped in his tracks.

“Wait, you didn’t know?” Sam said, just as surprised. “Nicole Leroux is long dead.”

“What do you mean? All I’ve learned so far is that she’s been missing since 1900.”

“There’s a grave in the cemetery up ahead that belongs to Nicole Leroux.” Sam cast his gaze down. With a knotted finger, he pointed to a church spire. “I came across it by chance. Our store is close, and we also sell our bread to the reverend. I think it was about three years after Nicole went missing. I stumbled upon her grave while I was taking a shortcut through the cemetery. The gravestone had the name Nicole Leroux.”

“No way.”

“I’m telling the truth. I cried back then. But bawling my eyes out isn’t really my thing. Besides, Nicole didn’t like gloom. Neither one of us wanted tears and flowers, so I brought pies and a bottle of red wine to her grave instead. Nicole loved wine. She used to drink it every night.”

“I see. So she’s really gone.”

“Yeah. I prayed that she’d be drinking, eating, singing and dancing in the afterlife. And that’s the end of our story.” Sam’s shoulders fell. His eyes narrowed even further as he recalled the distant past. “A beautiful girl, like a blue flame, and a boy. That was all we were.”

A winter wind blew past.

Hearing a faint sound in the distance, Kazuya turned. The door to Sam’s bakery opened, and Ms. Cecile stepped out. He waved his hand, squinting against the brightness.

The brilliant light of the sun fell softly on the pavement.

Kazuya parted ways with Sam and met up with Ms. Cecile.

They walked together up the gentle slope leading to a small church. Small patches of snow dotted the tree branches. They could see their own frosty breaths.

A child with a colorful scarf for adults wrapped around his neck came running toward them, and a woman who looked to be his nanny was

chasing after him. The child's breath was frosty white as well.

Dead branches crackled in the wind.

Kazuya was carrying a paper bag filled with a pile of fresh bread that Ms. Cecile had bought. The bag was so large that he couldn't see where he was going.

"You sure bought a lot, Teach."

Ms. Cecile's cheeks turned red. "You guys were taking so long. I ran out of things to talk about. So while I was asking random questions and recipes..." She fixed her round glasses. "...my appetite grew stronger and stronger."

"Can you even eat all of this?" Kazuya teased.

"It's fine. I'll give them to Sophie."

"The dorm mother?"

Ms. Cecile's face clouded. She kicked a pebble, and it rolled down the slope. "Sophie and I usually invite each other when going to Saubreme, but I couldn't inform her this morning. It was an emergency. If she found out I went to Saubreme alone, she would get mad that I didn't invite her."

"About that..."

Ms. Cecile inclined her head. "She can be a bit selfish sometimes. She can just go by herself, but she gets lonely, so she always wants me to invite her. Then she acts all sassy."

"The dorm mother is in Saubreme right now, though."

"...What?!" Ms. Cecile's face turned horrifying.

Kazuya poised himself to run. "Wh-Why are you looking at me like that? Why are you even mad?"

"Sophie's here? Why?!"

"Um, let me think." Kazuya tried to remember. "She read in the morning paper that there's going to be a play at the Phantom. She's loved Coco Rose since she was a kid. She even collected her photographs."

Ms. Cecile sniffed audibly. "I forgot about that sissy side of hers."

"Sissy?! That's too far. Everyone's free to have their own interests. It's a human right."

"So Sophie came to Saubreme alone, right?"

"Actually, I came here with her."

"You did? Not with me, her best friend, but with a little pipsqueak who just arrived last year?!"

“Hey, that’s not nice! You shouldn’t be talking like that to your student.”

“She can be so mean. Why didn’t she invite me?!”

“Uh…”

Ms. Cecile struck a power stance. “How dare she!” she bellowed with the power of a seasoned opera singer.

Kazuya looked incredulous. “Mad ‘cause she wasn’t invited. Acting all sassy. Are you sure you’re not talking about yourself? Ouch!” He jumped. “You just kicked a student! That’s abuse! I’m filing a complaint!” He flared.

“Whatever. I hate you, and I hate Sophie!”

Kazuya suddenly smiled. “Are you jealous? I didn’t know women could get that jealous and angry even when they become adults. You learn something new every day.”

“Hmph.”

They arrived at the church.

It was a tiny building, with a spire pointing up into the winter sky. The round bell far above swayed in the wind.

The cemetery at the back was small, neat, and somewhat lovely. Confections and beautiful wreaths lay before the rows of crosses, small and tightly-packed, that marked the graves.

Kazuya, carrying the pile of bread, couldn’t move properly, so Ms. Cecile read the words on the gravestones instead, starting from one end to another.

“Nope. Not this one either.”

Leafless trees shook bleakly, creaked solemnly, like a voice from the distant past.

Graves of small children, the elderly, siblings. Large and grand crosses, pretty crosses, humble crosses. Everything was still in the wind that blew from yesteryear.

Kazuya suddenly realized something. “Teach, aren’t you afraid of cemeteries?” he asked. “Hello? Ms. Cecile?”

Ms. Cecile put her hand on her glasses and attempted to run away.

The wind whistled past.

She shook her head. Her shoulder-length hair, soft and wavy, slowly fell back to her face.

“I’m not afraid!” she declared. “I have to assist Victorique too!”

“Okay.”

“I know I’m not much of a help.”

“...”

“But I have a bad feeling about this case. All that complicated stuff is beyond me. I just want us to return to St. Marguerite Academy together. So I won’t be scared. I’ve given it some thought.” Her face took on a distant look. “What scares me more than ghosts, more than the paranormal, is losing someone I care about in the real world forever.”

An eerie sound came from the distance, like the howl of a beast. Was it the winter wind? It was faint.

A withered branch shook, and a frozen brown leaf fell between them, rustling.

“The departed lie here. The dead. And there are people who care about them. It’s rude to be scared of them.” Ms. Cecile’s brown hair stirred softly. “So let’s do our best, yeah?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Ms. Cecile gasped. “I found it!” She pointed at a cross.

Kazuya swiftly ran over with a pile of bread in his arms.

Right in the middle of the tiny cemetery stood a lonely gravestone. Even when she was no longer in this world, it looked as if she still loved singing and dancing in front of everyone. The cross was small and ordinary, but the confections and bottles of wine made the grave look vibrant.

Kazuya and Ms. Cecile read the markings on the gravestone.

“Here Lies Nicole Leroux, Lovely Little Gold-and-Blue Bird.”

Her year of birth and death was also engraved below it.

“1881-1900”

“What?!” Kazuya gasped. “Nicole Leroux, drawn by a newspaper ad, went to a job interview organized by the Science Academy in 1990, and then went missing. Sometime after that she passed away and was buried here. So she died in the year she went missing? In 1900?”

The wind rose. Bare branches creaked eerily, and the church bell tolled. Kazuya’s heart trembled. His mouth tightened, and his jet-black eyes narrowed, as though glaring at someone plotting in the darkness.

Another dead leaf fell, this time without a sound. The wind blew it away.

Meanwhile, at the Phantom Theater.

“Hmm, so this is how this costume is cut. Very enlightening!”

On the side stage of the first floor, Inspector Blois was crouched down, marveling at the dress of a young actress, pulling its hem, flipping it.

The actress didn't pay him any heed; she was busy reading the script on her hand for the rehearsal.

Sitting regally on a crude wooden chair, Victorique watched him eerily. She was wearing a luxurious red-and-white dress and on her head a pink mini-hat that looked like a rosebud. Her golden hair hung down to the floor, coiled like a heavenly serpent. Her fingers held a small ceramic pipe, and on her lap, like a living, mysterious ornament sat a white dove, eyes closed and resting its wings.

Her tiny, beautiful face, like a rare exotic gem, scrunched up. "He seems more degenerate than usual today. What is he even doing?"

"Shut up, Victorique. Hmm, yes. The lace is sewn on temporarily from the back. Looks like it would come off easily. Why is that?"

"Grevil. My Wellspring of Wisdom can provide you the answer."

"What is it, then?"

"It's so when they perform in a different play, all they have to do is remove the laces, and they can recycle costumes. At first glance their costumes look glamorous, but they are, in fact, made of cheap and durable fabrics. I believe they are only adorned with expensive things, such as lace, pearls, decorative glass, to make them appear luxurious under the light. The cheap dresses are expendable, while the ornaments are genuine."

"Stop using your precious Wellspring of Wisdom for such trivial matters," Inspector Blois huffed. "Oh, crap."

Slowly, he turned with a horrified look on his face. His sister's emotionless eyes were staring at him.

"Stop glaring at me! It's scary! I was just messing with you. Why do you look like you want to kill me?!"

"Why are you so interested in the dress?"

"Uh, well..."

"I already know the answer. You're probably planning to make costumes for the dolls displayed in your office. What a creep."

"Can you stop analyzing every single thing out there?! Cursed wolf! Darn it. Whatever."

Inspector Blois stood up. He was still holding the bottom of the dress, so it flipped up, revealing the actress's long, seductive legs and black lace

garter belt. Reciting her lines, the actress kicked Inspector Blois with the heel of her shoe.

The inspector jumped, and for a while he remained silent, in pain.

The stage was brightly lit. The huge prop for the royal palace had already been assembled, and the place was filled with a glamorous atmosphere. The side stage, in contrast, was dim and dusty. Crude desks made from leftover wood and wooden chairs that looked like they had been there for decades squeaked when touched or sat upon. It was like looking at the light and the shadows of the people who had chosen the glamorous yet somehow horrifying job of being a stage actor.

Actors in their costumes were gathered at the wings. Some were doing exercises, some were checking their lines alone, and others were reading the same scene together. The tension of the first day, the pressure, their undying longing for the stage, all merged in the air, affecting each other. It was difficult to tell which emotions belonged to whom.

At the wings of the bright stage, in the shadows right next to the light, two young actresses were doing warm-up exercises together. They were holding hands, pushing and pulling.

When he saw them, Inspector Blois told Victorique, “That’s the young actress playing the role of Coco Rose.”

“Which one?” Victorique asked wearily.

“Both of them.”

“Can you explain further?”

“The Queen will be played by two people.”

Victorique closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, there was a blazing, icy fire in their depths, which Inspector Blois failed to notice.

“When we arrived at the theater, there was a press conference going on at the entrance,” he said. “I asked some questions too, until I got pushed away by the butts of those mean journalists. You should’ve seen their teamwork. It was amazing. The men had all kinds of butts—skinny, plump, hard, and soft like chiffon cakes. I was sent flying like a beach volleyball, and the next thing I knew, I was lying on the pavement. Those punks!”

“It should serve as a good lesson for you.”

“Wh-Who the hell do you think you are?!” He shot Victorique a hateful glare. “You bossy, sharp, tiny, and absolutely terrifying little...” He quickly gathered himself. “Let’s go back to the press conference that was so

graciously interrupted by the butts of those journalists.” He sounded eager this time. “What now, stupid journalists? Can’t get inside, huh?”

“I will join them.”

“What?!”

Inspector Blois turned around with a frown. But by that time, Victorique had already risen from the shabby wooden chair. She trotted across the side stage to the actresses.

“You there,” she called.

Startled, they both looked down.

“So cute!”

“Where’d this little girl come from? She looks like a doll! How old are you, little lady?”

“A hundred and fourteen.”

Inspector Blois was worried at first, but then he sighed in resignation. He followed Victorique to the wall where the actresses were.

“Yup. We’re playing the same character.”

“I play the old Queen Coco.”

The actresses *did* look very similar. They both had small, round faces and lovely blue eyes. They were more pretty than beautiful. Although they were already adults, they still had the air of young girls. There was a lonely, delicate, yet mischievous glint in their eyes.

Their long hairs were a dazzling gold, but a closer examination revealed brown hair near the roots of the other’s head. She had apparently dyed her hair for the play.

The actress with the dyed hair was wearing a soft chiffon blue dress that showed ample amount of cleavage. She let her hair hang down naturally.

The other was dressed in a ceremonial blue dress with puffy square sleeves and laces that covered her whole neck. Her outfit was the trend over twenty years ago. Her hair was also tied high in an old-fashioned style, the Queen Coco style that the people of Saubreme were used to seeing in photographs and other media. It came from France, apparently. In those days, young girls all over Saubreme dyed their hair gold and tied it high, imitating Queen Coco. But that was all in the past now.

The actress with the old-fashioned hairstyle pointed first at herself, then at the other woman.

“She’s going to play the Queen Coco after she moved to the country house. That is, from the year 1900 onwards.”

“The queen changed so much after being consumed by grief. To depict that, they wanted to use a different actress. Very innovative, huh? Ah, the goosebumps!”

“Yeah. We’ve been practicing together for a long time, trying to appear like the same person, so now we’re really good friends.”

“Yeah!”

The women giggled.

Was it the result of their training, or were they similar from the beginning? Even the way they laughed was almost identical, like they were mirror images of the other.

Victorique looked up at the actresses. “Did you have a hard time preparing for the role?”

“Yup. Some parts we had to act similarly.”

“And there were some changes between Queen Coco in the palace and Queen Coco in the country house. We had to consult others.”

“We even asked people who knew the queen.”

“I see. Such as?” Victorique asked.

“Let’s see…”

Queen Coco of the royal palace was more likely to pose with her right hand on her cheek, her left arm level, and her right elbow on the back of her left hand.

The women remained silent for a while. Victorique glanced up.

“The photographs!” Inspector Blois interrupted.

“Yup.” The actress nodded.

“Exactly!”

“What are you talking about?” Victorique asked.

“You’re just a child,” the inspector said, “and you don’t go out to town, so you might not be aware of it.”

“It’s not that I don’t go out. I *can’t* go out.”

Inspector Blois choked, then cleared his throat. “Anyway, all the photos of Queen Coco that were sold right after her marriage all had the same pose. A habit of hers apparently. But she didn’t look cranky or anything like that. She had this melancholic expression like she was talking to a little bird by the window. She looked so pretty!”

“It sounds gross coming from you.”

Inspector Blois went quiet and glared at his sister’s head with moist eyes.

“As soon as you strike that pose,” he addressed one of the actresses, “you transform into the Queen Coco everyone knew. Wonderful!”

“And as for me...”

The queen living in the country house struck the same pose, except her head was tilted dejectedly, her left arm was limp, and there was no light in her eyes, as if she were already dead. She stayed still for several moments. Then she turned her head, and immediately the light returned to her eyes.

“That was the Queen after she lost her spirit and moved to a country house to rest. We don’t have to state whether she’s depressed or troubled. We portray her state of mind through acting. That’s what actors are all about!”

“Yup!” The other woman nodded, smiling.

Then standing side by side, the woman on the right rested her pretty cheek on the palm of her right hand, and the woman on the left turned pale as a ghost, with her heavy cheek on the palm of her right hand, staring helplessly into the void. They stood still and motionless.

“Bravo!” Inspector Blois clapped his hands, thoroughly impressed.

Victorique also clapped her tiny, pudgy palms together, genuinely moved for once.

The actresses returned to their natural expressions, as though a magic spell had been broken. They smiled and bowed.

“Well?”

“Marvelous!” the inspector remarked.

“According to one theory, the Queen was pregnant with His Majesty Rupert’s child around the year 1900. The Queen Mother was expecting an heir. Unfortunately, the baby was stillborn. I don’t know what happened, but some say that the rift between the depressed Queen and His Majesty grew even deeper, and finally she was sent away to a country house to recuperate. But it’s really difficult.”

The women exchanged looks.

“Why is that?” Victorique asked.

“Because everyone in the kingdom knows Queen Coco very well. And even though she’s been dead for ten years, she’s still very popular. This

revival is proof of that. She was shy, sensitive, lovely, and quiet. I'm sure everyone felt close to her. The adults saw her as their daughter, the younger ones as their sister or a friend. That's why it's difficult. Everyone remembers her dearly, yet no one knows what kind of woman she really was. It's hard to play the role of an enigma."

"That's not all." The other woman added. "A quiet girl from a noble family married into foreign royalty and suffered from the inability to adapt to a different culture. After the stillbirth of her child, her position became more precarious. It would be presumptuous to say that we could understand her suffering, but we can find ways to portray her. However, there were scandalous rumors about Queen Coco."

"Her obsession with the occult, and going out at night," Victorique said.

"Exactly. It's just weird."

"Right?"

Sounds of props being assembled came from the stage. The director's voice could be heard as well. The color of the lights changed rapidly as the staff did some testing. It was dizzying.

"I heard that right after she married the king, her anxieties caused her to become obsessed with the occult," the actress playing the Queen Coco from the palace said. "There's even a rumor that she admired the mysterious alchemist and that they were too close. Although hardly credible, some went as far as to say that she loved the alchemist and not the king. The alchemist was also a traveler from another country; as fellow foreigners, she trusted him."

"I see," Victorique nodded. "Taking all that into account made studying the role more difficult."

"And even the anecdotes from after she left the palace are just odd," the other actress, playing the Queen Coco from the country house, broke in. "She was supposedly depressed when she left the palace, but years later, tabloids were full of accounts about seeing her out at night. Was she doing well or not? It's hard to tell. Why did a shy and quiet person change so much in her final years? Maybe something happened that triggered the change. But we can't figure it out, and it's giving me a headache. Like which is it?!"

"I see. So the second Queen Coco is also a difficult role to play."

"Yeah."

“It’s a huge pain.”

The actresses tilted their heads to the right and to the left, respectively.

Victorique sat down in a nearby wooden chair. She moved slowly, like an old person who had already lived a hundred years.

Inspector Blois watched her intently.

“Indeed, Coco Rose had two faces,” Victorique said to no one in particular. “A quiet, pretty, and quite ordinary French girl, she married at a young age to a foreign king and was thrust into the limelight. The anxiety made her turn to a dubious alchemist.”

“Yes,” Inspector Blois nodded gravely.

“You degenerate,” Victorique hissed. “I’m thinking right now. Stop interrupting.”

Inspector Blois grunted.

“Some say that the queen was under so much pressure that she often drank a strong drink called absinthe. It is also said that she would only share her feelings with the maid she brought with her from France, who looked exactly like her. And then the mysterious scandals in her later years. Spending her nights outside.”

Victorique stared at the two actresses as they went back to their warm-up exercises. Her eyes blinked coldly, as though she was afraid of something.

“But no matter what kind of rumors spread, Queen Coco’s popularity never declined. How did the king feel back then? An ordinary girl from a foreign country was more adored by the people than His Majesty Rupert, the heir to the throne.” She looked into the distance. “If I had to hazard a guess, Queen Coco’s popularity stemmed from her delicate and insecure nature. The human heart is a very mysterious thing. At times it longs for perfect beauty, righteousness, strength, and at other times that same person is captivated by the weak, the ephemeral, the imperfect.”

“What are you trying to say?” Inspector Blois growled.

“I just thought that despite everything—her weakness, mistakes, the questionable rumors, her mysterious death—the people of Saubreme had continued loving Queen Coco for 27 years. As if to validate their own existence. After all...”

“What?”

“The people of Saubreme, too, are weak, fragile, and they repeatedly make mistakes. Mysterious and imperfect.”

“Let me guess: but not you.” Inspector Blois gave her a spiteful glare.

“No.” Victorique paused. “I’m no different.”

She looked away, and brought the pipe to her glossy, cherry lips. A wisp of white smoke drifted upward.

In a voice so faint that her brother couldn’t hear, she said, “I’m a weak, fragile human being. I’m painfully aware of that every single day of my life. Even now.”

A hint of fear and worry crept onto her cold, expressionless little face. Slowly she turned her head in the direction of the door leading out of the theater.

Her lips moved. Mouthed Kujou’s name, it seemed.

But no voice came out.

She cast her eyes down forlornly.

“Remove it, quick.”

“She’s so amusing when she’s angry. She’s so tiny and lovely, but when she gets mad her hair rises like she’s being possessed by some horrifying demon.”

“That voice... Ginger Pie? I don’t know what’s going on, but remove it.”

“You look so serious pondering something, like a grownup. It doesn’t fit your tiny face at all. I was just trying to cheer you up. Living merrily is the best. Sing, dance. Feel better now?”

“Yes. I am in a great mood. So remove it already.”

From bottom to top, her field of vision widened. Pitch-black darkness turned to the original hectic scene of the backstage.

Ginger Pie, the actress playing the role of the Queen Mother, was in front of her. Wearing a regal attire and makeup, she was laughing hysterically.

Next to her stood another actor. His handsome features and elegant clothes suggested he was playing the role of His Majesty the King. He was holding a large crown in both hands, peering at her inquisitively.

“Oh, my. What a lovely little lady! Ginger Pie, is this your friend’s daughter that you were talking about?”

“Yup. You should check out the old portraits in the corridor later. She looks just like her mother. It’s actually astonishing how much they look alike.”

Ginger Pie’s loud voice attracted the attention of the other actors. They gathered around and started poking Victorique’s cheeks, pulling on her ribbons and hat.

“Stop it!” Victorique flared, but the actors ignored her protests.

“It blinked. Impressive detail,” one said.

“It’s not a doll. It’s real!”

“It’s so adorable! So tiny and chubby.”

Inspector Blois, sensing the danger, fled.

Victorique looked like she had wandered into a dusty, abandoned castle and surrounded by the ghosts of medieval nobles. She remained silent for a while, her small shoulders quivering.

“Get off me, you fools!” she finally snapped.

“See? She looks more and more like her mother when she gets mad. She puffs up her cheeks, and like a beast intimidating other animals, her long and magnificent, golden hair rises.” Ginger Pie’s face suddenly scrunched up.

Seeing her expression, the actor removed the hand that was poking Victorique’s cheek and put on the crown he had been holding.

It was the crown that was covering Victorique’s head earlier. Just the right size for a grown man’s head, it rested on top of his smoothly-combed, blond hair. The actor started looking like the king.

He patted her on the shoulder. “Cheer up, Ginger Pie. You’ve been crying a lot lately.”

“She just looks so much like Cordelia Gallo.” The flood of tears washed away her makeup. The other actors quickly gathered around her. “They look alike when she’s quiet, but when she gets angry, she’s the spitting image of her. She must share the same soul as my dear Cordelia.”

“You get so emotional so easily. Weren’t you crying about something else yesterday? Please get a grip, Ginger Pie. You’re like everyone’s maman. Sing, dance, live merrily, right?”

“Yeah. But still, people come and go. Even the kids here. They’ll all be gone someday, leaving me behind.”

The crowd of glamorous actors walked off somewhere with Ginger Pie. All that was left was Victorique, watching them go with an icy, blank look.

Slowly, her face tightened. A single, tiny teardrop fell. As if a drop of water just trickled from an ice sculpture.

Her lips parted. “Are Maman and I alike?”

The white dove, which had been flying around the ceiling for a while, slowly circled around and returned to Victorique, perching gently on her shoulder.

“I’m her spitting image when I get angry? Because we share the same soul?”

The dove cooed.

She cast her eyes down, and her face contorted faintly. It looked like she was smiling and holding back tears at the same time.

Lights flashed rapidly on stage, changing colors. The voices of the busy staff filled the air.

The theater’s dressing room was filled with the smell of face powder.

The powdery air was thick with the smell of sweat, tobacco smoke, and people, all wrapped in the clamor. Mirrors and huge cabinets stood on all sides, and chairs once used for guests, now with stained or broken decors and legs, were scattered everywhere. Discarded costumes and undergarments lay here and there. Pretty actors and dancers changing clothes and applying makeup sat before mirrors scrawled with the words “The show must go on!” in lipstick.

As soon as he stepped into the room, Kazuya coughed violently from the smell and smoke. He was running around fine earlier, but now he was feeling dizzy, and he leaned against a cabinet.

He felt something soft. He opened his eyes and saw a woman’s silk underwear.

Turning beet red, he raised both hands in the air.

One of the actresses noticed Kazuya. “What’s up, kid?” she asked listlessly.

Hers was the voice of someone that lived in the night, young, half-ruined by alcohol and cigarettes, but alluring nonetheless.

“I, uhh...” Kazuya stammered, still keeping his arms up.

The actress was wearing a resplendent royal dress on the top half of her body, but on the lower half there was only underwear and garter belt, her long legs resting on the dresser. Kazuya turned ever redder.

He looked up at the ceiling. "I'm looking for someone who's been around for a while. Someone working in this theater since the year 1900."

"What?" The woman scratched her head. "That far back, there's Ginger Pie first and foremost. Then a couple of others."

"Can you tell me who they are?"

"Sure," she said. "No, wait a sec." The actress looked around the dressing room as though an interesting idea came to her.

The women were listening to their conversation, blowing their pipes, combing their hair, drawing their eyebrows.

The actress grinned. "Why don't you take a guess?"

"Okay! ...Wait, what?"

"Which one of us has been around for a long time? Who are the grannies? Look closely!"

Holding a cigarette in her mouth, she grabbed Kazuya's cheek and pulled it, forcing him to look around the room. But he was absolutely clueless.

All the women were beautiful and sexy, every single one wearing proper makeup, making it difficult to tell them apart. Some had black hair, some blonde, others red, either long and wavy, straight, or cut short. Their eyes varied in color too; blue, gray, black, brown. They had different facial features, but he couldn't guess their ages.

Just then, Ms. Cecile appeared from behind Kazuya. "Her and her!"

A slim and dark-haired, smart-looking woman wearing a cotton bra and glasses with small gold chains, reading a newspaper, gave a jerk. Another woman with a sexy figure, brushing her red hair before a mirror, clicked her tongue.

"Bingo! Impressive!" the actress said.

"I'm a teacher, after all!" Cecile puffed her chest out.

The two sexy grannies approached Cecile, heels clicking, and started pulling on her hair from both sides.

"Why are you acting all smug, huh?"

"Little girl with the round glasses?"

"Ouch!"

They elbowed Kazuya's sides too.

"Why me too?!"

Kazuya and Ms. Cecile ran around the green room.

"Little Blue Rose died in 1900? What in the world are you talking about?" the red-haired woman said doubtfully, biting her cigarette.

They were in the narrow corridor outside the dressing room. There was a luxurious couch that looked like a prop, and a table so low that would have been awful to use. It was probably made that way so that the audience could easily see the actors' movements.

The red-haired woman, sitting on the table, shook her head. "That's not possible. I saw her."

"You did?" Kazuya gasped. He was standing erect, the tips of his shoes neatly aligned.

Nodding beside him was Ms. Cecile, her hair still a mess, wearing a grave look on her face.

The red-haired woman picked up the rabbit that had been following Kazuya and placed it on her lap. "She suddenly went missing. There were a lot of rumors. A moneybag fell in love with her and took her to the New World. She became an adventurer and went to Africa. Or she died, and someone found her grave."

"We found Nicole Leroux's grave in a little church near a back street," Kazuya said.

"Now that's just weird. Maybe it was already there while she was still alive?"

"Of course not!" the other woman, with the dark hair and the air of an intellectual, interjected.

She was lying lazily on the couch, stretching and yawning like a cat.

The red-haired woman turned to her. "But around 1910, about ten years since she went missing, I got married for the second time."

"You mean the third time, right?"

"Oh, shush!"

"Ahaha!"

"Ah, I hate long-time colleagues. They remember every single thing." She poked the head of the dark-haired woman, who responded with a huge

yawn. “Anyway, back then I saw Little Blue Rose for the first time in ten years. I told you about it, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“I was on my way home after an exhausting show, when I passed by a carriage so luxurious that I wondered what kind of noble was in it. Then I heard a familiar voice saying ‘It’s you!’ I looked up and saw Blue Rose’s tiny face peeking out of the small window, with a big smile that she always wore. A smile that said, ‘I’m so happy to be alive,’ like she would start dancing at any second. Innocent and wicked at the same time, pretty yet ugly. The smile of a woman. If that wasn’t Nicole Leroux, then who was it? She called to me when she saw me. I’m sure of it.” She shrugged. “Unless it was a ghost, of course. Haha!”

The dark-haired woman nodded somberly. “That reminds me, I think I saw her too.”

“Really?!”

“About two years after you told me about it. I was walking along the shore of a lake in the suburbs with my sugar daddy.”

“Did you have one back then? I’m the living list of all the men you’ve been with, and I don’t know about that.”

“Remember that guy I called Uncle? I lied to him about my age. It was off by about fifteen years, so he was actually younger than me.”

“Oh, *that* guy!”

The women looked at each other and laughed.

They began reenacting the woman’s love affair with the younger man using gestures. Given it was their job, their performance was very realistic and captivating. Kazuya watched with amazement.

Ms. Cecile was all worked up, stamping her feet on the floor. Standing on tiptoe, she covered Kazuya’s ears with her hands.

“This is not for kids!” she said.

Astonished, the women stopped their skit.

“What are you saying? You’re not a stuffy teacher, are you?”

“I am! I’m his homeroom teacher!”

“Oh!”

The women turned serious. Perhaps they recalled the image of a strict female teacher from their student days. They closed their mouths, as though

afraid of Ms. Cecile. Keeping their heads down, they exchanged quick glances.

“Tell me all about it later, okay?” Ms. Cecile whispered.

They raised their heads slowly, then nodded, smiling. Ms. Cecile nodded back and removed her hands from Kazuya’s ears.

“It’s fine now, Kujou,” she said. “They’re so obscene, huh? I already reprimanded them.”

“Actually,” Kazuya replied hesitantly. “You didn’t completely cover my ears, so unfortunately I heard everything.”

“What?!”

Ms. Cecile’s face turned crimson, and the two women burst into laughter. The wall-mounted lamps flickered.

“Anyway,” the dark-haired woman continued, “we were walking along the lakeside when we saw a group of people having a picnic, fully equipped. There was this noble lady wearing a fine dress and a bonnet, surrounded by her attendants. She seemed to love entertaining people because she started singing all of a sudden.”

“She started singing? A noblewoman? Is that even possible?”

“It is! And as soon as I heard her voice, a distant memory came back to me. I mean, how could I forget that lively voice that fills you with so much joy that you’re alive? And then she started dancing. I looked like she was having so much fun. I almost called her name. ‘Hey there, Downtown Blue Rose! I see your right leg’s still going strong!’ Her pet phrase used to be ‘I have the most beautiful right leg in Saubreme. But it actually has a competition.’ And when the customers would ask her, ‘Where?’ she would answer, ‘My left leg!’ and then laugh out loud.”

“You didn’t call out to her?” Kazuya asked.

“How could I?”

“Of course not.”

Both women nodded.

The dark-haired woman gave a weary shrug. “By the looks of it, a moneybag or a nobleman took her as his wife. Either that, or she became a dream at dawn, our secret term for a mistress. She was living a great life. Old colleagues try not to talk to them. It’s an unspoken rule among us. I say unspoken because it’s not like someone actually came up with it.”

“We just follow it anyway. Right?”

The two women reached out their arms and held each other's hands for just a moment. While the river of time flowed into the future, that moment alone seemed to stop.

"So you saw her in 1912," Kazuya muttered, confused.

The rabbit hopped away and returned to Kazuya's feet.

The clamor in the green room was growing louder. The women slowly stood up, winked, and headed back into the green room. The complex scent of face powder, perfume, cigarettes, sweat, the passage of time, and various emotions drifted down the corridor.

Once it was quiet, the corridor suddenly felt much colder, and it seemed spacious and lonely.

Kazuya sat down at the table. "We learned from looking into the newspaper ad that Nicole Leroux had applied for a secretary position and was accepted. It had odd requirements: blond hair, blue eyes, shoe size, and so on. According to a witness who worked one floor below, the person interviewing her was Jupiter Roget from the Academy of Science. After that, Nicole went missing."

"Yeah." Ms. Cecile nodded.

"According to Sam the baker, Nicole died not long after she disappeared from the theater. Like he said, there was a grave that belonged to her in the cemetery, marked with the year of her death, 1900." Kazuya paused. He looked up at the dusty ceiling and sighed. "But according to her fellow dancers, they saw a woman who looked like Nicole in 1910 and 1912. In the middle of the night, riding a luxurious carriage, and by the lake having a picnic. What does this mean?" He pulled his gaze away from the ceiling and looked around. "Ms. Cecile. What on earth are you doing?"

The teacher yelped. She was sitting on the sofa where the dark-haired actress was lying earlier, stretching her petite body in imitation, practicing brushing back her hair. She was struggling to get it right, squirming this way and that. When Kazuya saw her, she bolted to her feet.

"It's not for kids!" She covered Kazuya's eyes with both hands.

"T-Teach..."

"I'll have some intensive training sessions with Sophie later."

"O-Okay. I'm, uh... going to Victorique."

Ms. Cecile nodded with a grave look. "Okay."

Kazuya stood up and lifted the rabbit in his arms. "I'm not sure if I've gathered all the fragments of chaos that Victorique needs, but I'll give a report for now. Besides, she's with Inspector Blois. I can't help but feel worried."

Ms. Cecile frowned at the mention of Inspector Blois. "Let's go, Kujou."
"Okay. Ah wait, little bunny!"

The rabbit jumped out of Kazuya's hands and scurried down the hallway. He went after it, his shoes echoing as he dove into the dark den. When he turned the corner, a white dove came flying in his direction, wings rustling. What was a tiny white dot at first grew bigger, until it began circling above the rabbit's head, its eyes, like glass beads, blinking.

"Hey!" Kazuya dashed to where the rabbit and the dove were.

Victorique walked slowly offstage.

She wasn't sure which corner to turn and where in the theater she was. The dove perched on her shoulder suddenly flapped its wings and flew down the corridor. She trotted after it through the dim corridor, where cobwebs hung in the corners.

When she turned the corner, she spotted Kazuya Kujou standing there, dimly illuminated by the lamps.

The pigeon landed on his head and pulled at his jet-black hair as if planning to build a nest. He was yelping in pain, but instead of shooing the dove away, he slowly bent down and reached for the rabbit at his feet.

Sensing a presence, he looked in her direction. "Oh, Victorique!" His face lit up as he called her name.

"Yes," the girl answered curtly. She was small and lovely like a porcelain doll, with a cold expression on her face.

Kazuya ran up to her, holding the rabbit. A second later, Ms. Cecile also appeared at the end of the corridor.

"I don't know if it'll be of any help," Kazuya said in a bright voice. "But I went around Saubreme with Ms. Cecile, gathering all sorts of testimonies about the Downtown Blue Rose you were curious about."

"Hmm."

"Nicole Leroux is both dead and alive. It's all very strange."

Victorique cast her gaze down, frowning. Her golden hair undulated like waves, creating curious patterns.

After hearing from Kazuya and Ms. Cecile, Victorique said, “Towards zero.”

“What’s that?” Kazuya asked.

Victorique lifted the pipe with her chubby fingers and took a puff. “Allow me to dumb it down so that a lamebrain like you, whose head is packed with pumpkin pudding, can understand.”

“How can you even afford to be arrogant at a time like this? It’s impressive, in a way.”

“Hmm?”

“S-Sorry! Stop looking at me like that!”

“In short, sometimes the key to a case happens at a completely different time from when the crime was committed or thought to have been committed. We call that time when the real crime happened as zero hour.”

“Hmm.”

“For example. Suppose you have a stomach ache, Kujou. You writhe in agony, and the pain is so unbearable that you shed tears and reflect on the past and the future.”

Kazuya frowned. “That’s a disturbing example.”

Ms. Cecile was listening grimly.

“You suspect it was the stewed chicken you had for lunch. So you blame the one who cooked it, the dorm mother. You lambast her so harshly that you draw the ire of the people around you.”

“I wouldn’t do that! Whatever. Continue.”

“But. That wasn’t actually what happened. The reason behind your stomachache was the spoiled bread you had in your room in the morning!”

“I see. Then I falsely accused the dorm mother. I gotta apologize to her quick,” Kazuya said restlessly.

“Did the cause for the bread getting spoiled occur in the morning?”

Victorique went on. “No. The bread went bad because it was from dinner the night before, and you took it back to your room and left it on your desk. By morning, the bread had gone bad. And you munched on it like an idiot.”

“Ahuh, ahuh.”

“In this case, zero hour was not when you had the chicken for lunch, nor when you put the bread in your mouth in the morning. It was at dinner the night before. You were so full that you couldn’t finish the bread, but then

you came up with a really stupid idea to take it back to your room.” Her eyes opened wide. “That was the zero hour!”

“Maybe it was the example, but it didn’t really click. Whatever, I guess.” Kazuya nodded. “But what does that have to do with the current case?”

“We don’t know yet.” Victorique shook her head. “But...” Her green eyes dimmed. She looked up at the flickering lantern and exhaled. “To find out this case’s zero hour, our only option might be to dig up a grave.”

Kazuya shuddered. Ms. Cecile’s mouth dropped open, and she made the sign of the cross.

“That’s it for you two,” Victorique said, walking away.

“What?” Kazuya moved in front of her.

Victorique shook her head. “You can’t get involved any more than this. Take Cecile with you and return to the academy.”

Behind her tiny figure, the dark, beautiful part of Europe’s long history that Kazuya, an international student from a faraway country, could not even imagine, stirred like black smoke.

Fearing the presence, yet quietly taking it in, Victorique closed her eyes and exhaled slowly.

Then she opened her eyes. “I’ll follow you soon,” she said unsurely.

“Are you sure?” Kazuya’s face was stern.

“Yes. I’m hoping I can. I don’t know how it’s going to turn out. All I can say is that you must not get involved in this case.” She hung her head. “An unsolved murder that happened a long time ago. The victim is a big shot, so the people involved must be too. If I don’t solve it, I won’t be able to return to the academy. This case is extremely dangerous.”

“I said I would get involved,” Kazuya said softly. “I’m not leaving. I’m staying with you. I might be useless, but there might be something I could help with. Besides...” Footsteps echoed down the corridor. “You can’t go alone.”

Victorique’s cherry lips quivered.

“Fate is something you share with someone. Sadness, happiness, the past, the future. Everything is not yours to bear alone anymore.”

The cobwebs hanging in the corridor glistened eerily under the lamplight.

The dove on Kazuya’s head stirred.

Victorique remained silent.

Kazuya did not wait for a reply either. Drifting in the silence, he simply walked beside the mysterious girl, the most powerful mind in all of Europe and the ultimate weapon of the Old World.

Mechanical Turk 3

I don't know how much time had passed since then.

A fog still hovered in my mind. I had left the stone tower where I spent a chilling winter, and found myself in a white room, small and square.

A bunk. A small table. A bird sometimes perched on the small square window. Animals liked me, apparently. Perhaps they could tell that I used to live in the woods. I started cutting the bread I was served into small pieces to feed the bird.

I spent most of my time staring at a spot on the wall, singing and thinking about things. But the drug they kept on giving me prevented me from thinking about any one thing for too long. My consciousness was like a shell between the waves, undulating and drifting away.

I sang when I thought back to my days at the theater, and I sobbed when I thought of my daughter.

Did I really have a daughter? My memories and emotions were too vague. Everything seemed to disappear into oblivion.

The place looked like a hospital. Looking out of the window, it seemed to be located on a hill in the city. I could see clusters of buildings in the distance. Beyond was a vast expanse of blue skies.

At one point a dark-haired girl occupied the room next to mine. Once a week, when I was taken out to bathe, I could see her through the window. She, too, was drugged and seemed to be in a daze, but she would occasionally raise her head and look at me. On the door of the hospital room was scribbled the name Alex.

The door to my room bore the name Cordelia.

I didn't know how much time had passed.

One day.

Help came.

Out of nowhere.

Boys with red hair.

A familiar face stood idly by my bedside, a face I'd parted with since I waved to him at the back door of the theater.

It was nighttime. The moonlight from the small window seemed to burn coldly. The boy's hair was the color of flames, just as it had been in the past, crimson and billowy in the moonlight. Four green eyes, sharp as a beast's, glowed in the night.

Yes. Four.

At first I thought that I was seeing a double image of him because of the drug, but I was wrong.

There were two Brian Roscoes.

There are people in this world that can exist in multiple places at once. They were not just twins. They turned their heads to the right at the same time, bit their thin lips, and howled. They moved at exactly the same time, wearing the exact same expression. Astonished, I reached out with my skinny arm and touched them both. There really were two of them. The two Brians fell to their knees and touched my shoulder, then my cheek.

"Sorry for being late."

"Sorry for being late."

They both apologized to me.

Footsteps of the night guard came down the corridor. The narrow beam of a flashlight peeked through the small window on the door. My breath caught. But before I knew it, the two Brians had magically vanished. The small window closed, and the guard moved away. I was terrified. Was it just my hallucination? But then they reappeared from somewhere in the darkness.

In my foggy mind, I suddenly remembered what my fellow dancers had told me. The red-haired boy who came to watch our show was an apprentice magician. Was this one of his tricks? The two Brians magically removed the chains restraining me to the bed. It had been years, I thought. My wrists felt light. I thought I could fly. But my body was heavy and cold as steel.

One carried me on his back. The other produced two pistols and held them in both hands.

I gasped.

"You leave with her. I'll take care of any pursuers."

"If you survive, we meet in that room."

"If I don't, consider me dead. And you will carry on alone."

“Not alone. She’s with me. Me, you, and Cordelia. Our princess. It’s either two, or three of us.”

“Right.”

“Good luck.”

The conversation lasted only a moment; they spoke so fast I could barely discern what they were saying. It took only a second or two for them to share this much information. It sounded like two red beasts howling restlessly, not human beings. I closed my eyes.

The two Brians leapt at the same time and kicked the door open.

A siren sounded. Voices announcing an intruder. Shots were fired nearby. The smell of blood rose like red smoke, dyeing the air. Furious roars. Wild screams of those whose lives were forfeit. Bullets zipping inches from me.

My consciousness faded. Soon after, my head dropped, and I fainted.

Two boys. Fun memories of the theater. Terror in the stone tower. My soul that was taken from me, my little girl.

Memories flashed like bullets, and I sank, as if a giant creature had grabbed my legs and dragged me to the bottom of the dark sea.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in a large basement.

But it was not a dark and cold space like the tower where I was locked up. It was a rented building that used to be a warehouse. Everywhere there were glass boxes large enough to hold one adult, cabinets full of weird-looking things, and wax figures of a woman’s head, frozen in horror, yet somehow comical.

In the middle of the room was a canopied bed, small and white, like the bed of a princess, where I lay. I didn’t know how much time had passed.

Brian suddenly appeared from an open cabinet that was supposed to be empty. There was no one there until now.

I shrieked, to Brian’s astonishment.

“You’re awake, Cordelia.” He looked at me. “There’s a mirror on the inside. It’s a trick. We’re not sorcerers.”

“We’re magicians. We can’t cast spells.”

Another Brian emerged from behind the canopy’s thin fabric. I was relieved to see him alive, but his upper body was naked, wrapped in layers of bandages. He was probably shot while trying to rescue me.

They drew closer slowly.

These men were allies. They saved me.

That's what I thought. But a hair-raising terror gripped my entire body. I couldn't escape it.

For many years, I had been surrounded by men. Albert de Blois, who abused me, the doctor who kept drugging me and finally took away my daughter, the strange noblemen.

People who did nothing but take from me.

I jumped off the bed in terror. My body, chained and malnourished for so long, had once been full of youth, singing, dancing, moving freely to my heart's content, but now my bones felt heavy, creaking after only a couple of steps.

"Don't move," one Brian said.

"You'll break your bones," the other added. "Your body must take its time to heal."

"And we're on your side."

"Descendants of the ancient people of Saillune. The land of the Gray Wolves. Now reduced to a small village deep in the Alps."

"We don't harm our own."

"We will never harm you."

I scrambled away.

Men. Men's voices.

Our own? They won't do what those noblemen did? My limbs screamed from pain and fear.

There was a weird-looking, wooden doll in front of me.

The upper half of a man's body, its head wrapped in a Turkish turban, was attached to a square wooden box. In front of him was a chessboard, his hands outstretched toward it.

There was a lid on the right side of the box. It was open, so I quickly scurried inside.

I still wasn't sure why I chose the box. Perhaps it reminded me of how, when I gave birth to my daughter, I felt like a wooden doll that had lost its soul.

I dove into the box and closed the lid. The inside was hollow, and I was able to slip into the upper half of the wooden doll. Perhaps it was a device used for magic tricks where a person—not a full-grown man, but a child or a smaller woman like me—could enter and pretend to be a mechanical doll.

I inserted myself into the doll's head. There were holes in the eyes, so I could see what was going on outside.

The two Brians approached carefully.

"She entered the Turk!"

"Cordelia?"

"You're finally free."

"But it will take a long time for her mind to regain its freedom."

"We have a lot of things to talk to about. About the ancient, proud people of Saillune, now almost extinct, our roots, and the uneasy future that awaits us."

"And most importantly..."

"We want to apologize."

"Yes. The Marquis, the Ministry of the Occult, kidnapped you right in front of our eyes, holding you captive. The stone tower next to Castle Blois, surrounded by woods, was heavily-guarded, and we couldn't get close."

"And it took some time to figure out where you were transported to afterwards. We never thought you'd been confined in a mental hospital just a stone's throw away from where we performed."

"We owe you."

"An apology."

My heart, frozen like ice, slowly began to thaw at the thought that there was someone who had been searching for me.

But it took a long time.

Tears rolled down their cheeks at the same time. I was surprised. I moved the Turk's hand in denial.

But no matter how much I waved the wooden doll's hand, their tears of regret never stopped streaming.

And so I began to accompany the magician Brian Roscoe on his shows as his assistant. While I was confined to the stone tower and the hospital, the two Brians became full-fledged illusionists and went from town to town, performing in various theaters. I enjoyed being involved with theater. After all, I used to be a dancer. The atmosphere at night. The sweet, dark scent. The applause from the audience, like a blessing from God.

Most of the time I was in the Mechanical Turk, while we were on the road or doing shows. I would hole myself up in this tiny machine, which

seemed like it couldn't hold a person inside, and played chess with customers.

I never lost. I'd been banished from my village, drugged for a long time, but a Gray Wolf's intellect could never be bested by mere humans.

The two Brians patiently took care of me.

And something, whether it was camaraderie or something akin to love, gradually formed between me and the two red wolves.

I can say now that I love them.

But our bond was brittle, and at the same time complicated.

I never stopped thinking about my lost daughter, but they despised Albert de Blois so much that they hated her as well. We always disagreed when it came to her, but whenever I was worried about my daughter, they would, although reluctantly, go check on her.

Eventually I was able to leave the Mechanical Turk for relatively long periods of time. Little by little the fear left my body.

I'm still with them, waiting for the next storm, watching my daughter and Albert de Blois and his Ministry of the Occult. Sometimes from the trees, like a beast. Other times from deep in the forest. Never being noticed by anyone.

As I talked to them, I gradually learned about their upbringing and their feelings about me.

But that's another story.

It would be a long, long time before I could talk about it.

It was so dark and damp in the Mechanical Turk, where I spent most of my days, that I felt like I'd been buried alive in a moving tomb.

As though the dead was watching the world through two tiny holes.

Yes.

The eyes of the living buried alive.

Chapter 4: Dream at Dawn

“Dig up a grave?” Marquis Albert de Blois’s voice reverberated forbiddingly throughout the basement hall.

Everything seemed to tremble—the icy water flowing endlessly from a giant lion’s mouth, the wax figures of women floating in the man-made pond, the pile of chairs and small tables in the corner.

His voice appeared to tear through the fabric of time and space; for a moment it felt like Cordelia Gallo, Ginger Pie, all the young, lively women who had sung and danced here decades ago, in roller skates and wedding clothes, with huge plumes on their heads and showing their skin, glided past Victorique and Marquis de Blois as they stared fixedly at each other, unyielding.

The illusion vanished into the walls with the sound of laughter.

In reality, standing around Victorique and Marquis de Blois were Kazuya, Ms. Cecile, and Inspector Blois with his pointy, golden cannon.

Marquis de Blois’s dark green eyes glowed eerily.

Keeping his back straight, Kazuya circled around Victorique, as though trying to disrupt the silent staring contest between the two. His leather shoes, dark-blue in color as specified by the academy, clicked loudly. Inspector Blois was pacing back and forth with a frown in front of his father, leaning so far forward that his drill could’ve stabbed someone. Ms. Cecile was standing in front of Victorique, munching on the sandwich she had bought as she swayed her upper body from side to side like the needle on a metronome.

Marquis de Blois’s cheek, eerily pale as the reaper’s, twitched ferociously. “Here I was, wondering what the little wolf was going to say. Dig a grave?” He threw his head back and laughed. “You want to dig the grave of the Blue Rose of Saubreme, of Queen Coco? You’ll never receive the king’s permission, not for that kind of reason—solving a murder case.” He turned his attention to the others. “Stay put, you lot. You’re disturbing us.”

“No, not Queen Coco’s grave,” Victorique denied in her deep, husky voice.

The sound of the water flowing from the lion’s mouth echoed low in the silence.

“What?”

“The Downtown Blue Rose’s grave.”

Marquis de Blois’ shoulders slowly dropped back down. His monocle glinted ominously. “Who is that?”

“She used to be a dancer in this theater. She’s buried in a small church nearby.”

“...”

Marquis de Blois and Victorique stared at each other.

“Get out of the way,” Victorique hissed at Ms. Cecile.

The teacher froze. “I’m just worried. I can’t leave you two alone. Oh, do you want bread stuffed with snakeberry jam?”

“Of course.”

“Here you go.”

Holding the bread in her tiny hands, Victorique bit into it like a squirrel. She glanced up. “Kujou is wandering around like he’s ready for combat, and brother is probably trying to protect Father with that drill of his. Hmph.”

“We all feel the odd atmosphere. Munch, munch.”

“Stop moving, Kujou! Munch, munch.”

Kazuya froze. Blinking, he looked at Victorique.

Marquis de Blois called for his men and gave them an order in his dreadful, deep voice. He then turned to Victorique.

“Let’s go,” he said.

His face was devoid of emotion, and his eyes, deep as the abyss, gleamed viciously.

Victorique nodded, and she cast her gaze down, her eyes flickering uneasily.

The small pink hat on her head and the dove perched on her shoulder swayed as Victorique walked along. Kazuya and Ms. Cecile followed behind, the former marching rhythmically like a soldier, the latter looking around, holding a sandwich.

The sound of the water flowing from the lion's mouth continued to echo eerily through the underground hall.

They exited the theater and took a carriage to the church.

Marquis de Blois was wearing a frightening look as he pondered over something. Victorique was watching him with an expression as blank as a doll's. Kazuya couldn't tell what was on either's mind.

It was cold outside. Their breaths were white as ice.

It was still early, but it being winter the sun had already set, and night was creeping in on the city. Darkness was already coiling around the eaves of stores, on the twilit streets, in the corners of vacant lots, waiting patiently for night to come.

"Father," Victorique, with nary an expression on her face, suddenly called.

Everyone shuddered, except for Marquis de Blois, who slowly lowered his chin and stared at the little Gray Wolf through his eerie monocle. His eyes were icy cold.

"What?"

"You've met Queen Coco, no?"

Marquis de Blois nodded, wrinkles appearing on his chin. When he moved his head, his hair—once glittering golden, tied-up like a horse's tail, but now turning silver—stirred like a rippling wave.

When he was younger, he visited Leviathan, the masked alchemist living in the clock tower, while wearing a white blouse and riding trousers, a simple attire that emphasized his beauty.

His cat-like green eyes had a profound gleam to them, torn between childlike curiosity and cunning ambition, and his cheeks were rosy as flowers in full bloom.

Believing in the power of the Leviathan, he planned to create an army of artificial human beings—homunculi—at St. Marguerite Academy to help fight in the coming storm, the first global war in human history, an unprecedented catastrophe that would engulf everything.

But Leviathan's downfall and disappearance crushed the young Albert's ambition. Then about ten years later, he found a descendant of the legendary Gray Wolves in the theater in Saubreme, captured it, and locked it up in a tower made of stone.

Marquis de Blois, now older, with a wicked and terrifying aura that he wore around him like a second skin, was under the stare of Victorique, a young pup with formidable intellect, born between him and the Gray Wolf.

“Coco Rose? Of course.”

Victorique gave him a glare, urging him to continue.

Everyone stared at Marquis de Blois’ mouth with bated breath.

“It was 1987, when she came from France and married into the royal family,” he began. “I saw her for the first time at the wedding ceremony held at the palace. The king looked magnificent, wearing a white silk robe and a large crown on his head. The queen-to-be was quiet and shy, and looked terrified of the lavish party.”

“Hmm.”

“I still remember her shoulders trembling like it was only yesterday.”

The carriage rocked. In the distance stood the church’s small spire. The bell tolled, announcing the evening hour.

“Soon the whole kingdom was shaken by Coco Rose’s sudden rise in popularity. It was almost as if the people had lost their minds. She indeed looked lovely in her public photographs, and in the newspapers, where she stood next to the king. But when I saw her in person at the royal banquet, she seemed like a very ordinary, even shy, girl. She barely responded when spoken to, and I could not puzzle out how she earned so much of the public’s admiration.”

“I see.”

“She stayed in the royal palace for only three years, until the year 1900. She then spent most of the next fourteen years recuperating in a country house in the suburbs. Some said that her moving was simply an excuse for her to enjoy herself, but they were unaware of the queen’s true nature.” Marquis de Blois scratched his chin with his long, sinister fingers, each looking like sharp knives. “I met Coco Rose once in the academy’s clock tower. I think it was in 1899.”

“When you went to see Leviathan.”

“That is correct.”

Victorique’s golden hair billowed softly, as though blown by the wind.

“She was kneeling before the masked alchemist, almost prostrate. Her eyes were closed and her hands were clasped together in front of her chest. She looked like a statue of Mary praying to God. I am not a very religious

person, of course, yet I couldn't help but make the sign of the cross as I watched the queen silently. A young woman, the queen of our kingdom, revered a faceless alchemist like he was a god. I thought it bizarre."

"Hmm."

"When Coco Rose noticed me, she instantly turned crimson. She then rose to her feet and hid behind the curtains. The maid who constantly accompanied her was in the corner, and she bowed to me instead. Coco Rose must have recognized me as a member of Sauville's nobility, but was too embarrassed to say a word of greeting, let alone talk to someone she did not know well. The Coco Rose of those days was shockingly timid."

"The Blue Rose. The delicate and lovely queen. The people's precious girl."

The carriage slowed down, then lurched to a halt.

Victorique's hair fell soundlessly onto Kazuya's lap, a golden serpent living in the heavens falling to earth through a rift in the clouds. Kazuya stroked it carefully.

"Hands off," Victorique hissed.

"Sorry." Kazuya sat up straight. "I won't do it again!"

"Oui."

Victorique turned her face away and stood up.

Kazuya disembarked first. He stretched out both hands and gently lowered his little friend, magnificent as a porcelain doll, out of the carriage and onto the ground. Despite her earlier warning, she didn't appear reluctant about him carrying her. She simply stared somberly at the evening sky in silence.

Watching them idly, Inspector Blois mumbled, "I should've brought my doll."

"Wh-What are you talking about?"

"Kujou, at least lend me your rabbit. Only for a bit. I've been so stressed all day. My sassy sister is here, my father is here, and I'm completely clueless about the case despite being a famed inspector. If I don't cuddle something soft and cute and tiny in my hands right now, a hole will form in my stomach."

"Uh... I don't think the bunny likes the idea."

"For the record: it's a hole the size of a tennis ball, or a fist. Aren't you scared?"

“I guess...? Oh, but look, it’s gone.”

“Wait for me, you cute and little thing!”

Inspector Blois sprinted after the rabbit as it hopped across the cold church grounds toward the cemetery.

Watching the white smoke rising from her pipe, Victorique said, “If only my brother’s collection of Grafenstein’s dolls had legs that moved too.”

“Hmm?”

“They would scatter in all directions like spiderlings.”

“That’s true. Oh.”

People were already gathered around the small grave that he and Ms. Cecile had found earlier—the grave of Nicole Leroux, the dancer known as the “Downtown Blue Rose.”

“It’s over there.” Kazuya pointed. “Let’s go.”

“Hmm.”

Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth. From her glossy, cherry lips came either a cold breath, or white smoke, or a frozen sigh, which drifted softly in the air and vanished.

Dead leaves rustled past their feet.

Almost as soon as the group appeared, a permit requested by Marquis de Blois arrived from the authorities.

A gravedigger of large build in muddy trousers was sitting on the adjacent gravestone, waiting for instructions. Holding a shovel, he was smoking a cigarette as he stared blankly at the sky.

Crows were circling the church’s spire, spreading their pitch-black wings, screeching ominously from time to time.

The sun was setting; it was twilight.

Upon Marquis de Blois’ arrival, a group of men who appeared to be officials of the Ministry of the Occult stood up and surrounded the place.

The elderly reverend and his family—a skinny woman and a group of pale-faced, freckled children—were watching fearfully from a distance.

The crows were circling faster.

“Dig up Nicole Leroux’s grave,” Marquis de Blois ordered in a deep, terrifying voice.

The reverend, his family, and the gravedigger all made the sign of the cross. The officials made praying gestures, too.

“Namandabu, namandabu, namandabu,” Kazuya murmured.

“Are you trying to lay a curse on Nicole Leroux?” Victorique asked.
“Why?”

“I’m not! How rude. It’s a prayer from my country.”

“It sounds eerie.”

“You’re simply ignorant about foreign culture. In that case, I’ll recite a longer and scarier prayer.” Kazuya stood straight, took off his hat, and held it in front of his chest.

“Namu Myoho Renge Kyo...”

“Stop.”

“Ow!” Kazuya jumped. “You’re gonna burn me with your pipe! I’m filing a complaint!”

“Quiet. You’re too loud, therefore I forbid you to be angry. Oh, I can see the coffin now.”

“Hmm?” Kazuya followed her gaze.

From the hole that the gravedigger was digging peeked what seemed like a rotting plank of wood. Kazuya took a deep breath, squeezed Victorique’s hand, and slowly approached the grave.

Victorique swung her hand wildly around from left to right, up and down, forward and backward. Perhaps she didn’t like holding hands. But she wasn’t letting go.

“Ouch! You’re gonna dislocate my shoulder!” Kazuya screamed, not letting go either.

“There it is!”

After removing the dirt, Nicole Leroux’s body appeared.

The reverend’s wife shrieked and retreated, covering the children’s eyes.
“Don’t look! Oh, our Lord in heaven...”

Crows circling high above cast dark shadows on the cemetery. The light from the evening sky shone on everyone present.

“Th-There’s no head!”

“That can’t be!” the reverend shouted, shaking.

The officials all looked at him. Clutching the rosary around his neck, the reverend shook his head repeatedly.

Withered branches groaned in the wind.

“I was told she was a penniless dancer, and she passed away from an illness. There’s records. I remember now. There were men like you.”

“Like us?”

“Yes. A group of finely-dressed, official-looking men came and processed her. They didn’t look like family, friends, or lovers. I *did* find that strange.”

“That was in the year 1900, correct?” Victorique asked.

The reverend nodded fearfully. “Yes.”

“It was probably the same men who hired Nicole Leroux using the strange ad,” Victorique mumbled to herself. “The Academy of Science.”

“Look at the dress!”

The ministry officials took a step back. Some made the sign of the cross over and over. Others sank to the ground, speechless.

Only Victorique and Marquis de Blois peered into the grave without fear.

Inside was the body of a woman, head and torso separated. Decades had passed, and her beauty, vivacity, finesse when she was still alive, were now lost forever in the earth.

Her torso was covered in grave wax. The part where her neck was severed looked horrifying.

Overly puffy square sleeves. Layers of lace covering the collar. Billowy skirt that was tight at the waist. Partly-decayed cloth, its color no longer discernible.

The corpse had the exact same outfit that one of the actresses playing Coco Rose was wearing.

But unlike the actress’s costume, which was made of cheap, durable cloth, the decapitated body wore fine silk and genuine lace. The cameo brooch around her neck was luxurious as well.

Overall the outfit seemed difficult to move in, wrapped tight around the body. It was a dress that would never have been worn by Nicole Leroux, a dancer.

The fingers peeking out from the dress were pale, as though still alive. Like a wax figure displayed at the entrance of the theater.

Marquis de Blois put a finger to his chin. “I highly doubt she was buried normally. They must have used some kind of chemical to force saponification.”

“Yes.”

“And when it comes to scientific knowledge, our kingdom’s Academy of Science is the best in Europe.”

“It appears she was stabbed in the chest.” Victorique pointed to the corpse’s chest, as though trying to divert attention away from the Academy of Science.

While the old and discolored dress made it difficult to see, there was indeed a hole and a brownish mark that looked like blood.

“Stabbed, injected with chemicals, then decapitated,” Marquis de Blois said.

“But her neck.”

“It’s decomposed.” There was a slight twist to his cruel lips.

“It would seem so.”

The woman’s head was placed on top of the torso, separate from the body. Her golden hair dangled softly. Unlike the torso, however, the head was heavily decomposed, its skin gone.

There was a gold tooth inside its dislocated jaw.

“Why is the body covered in grave wax, but the head is decomposed?”

Marquis de Blois stood up and shook his head. His silver hair swayed ominously.

Waiting for this exact moment, Victorique reached out her hand.

Kazuya, who had been watching from the side, stopped her, and touched the body in her stead. He gave her an inquisitive look and opened the cameo brooch around its neck.

There was a tiny piece of folded paper inside.

Victorique nodded. She took it and hid in her hand. Kazuya then closed the brooch.

Marquis de Blois turned back to them, grim-faced. “What are you two doing?!” he barked.

Kazuya bolted to his feet. “Nan myo hoo ren kyo...” Standing erectly, he began praying.

Marquis glared at his back, not hiding his disgust. “Hmph. Just an oriental performing a ritual for the dead.”

Victorique used the chance to leave the scene.

What started as an act to bail out Victorique turned into a serious prayer. Before Kazuya knew it, the reverend, his wife, and their children had

gathered around the grave and began praying together. The wife had stopped telling her kids not to look.

Their prayers echoed around the dancer's desecrated grave—Kazuya's peculiar chant, the reverend's flowing supplication, the wife's sincere voice, the children's sweet stutters—rising softly from the cemetery to the spire, then up to the skies, far above to the world above the clouds where Nicole Leroux danced.

Away from the grave, where Kazuya's voice echoed low and passionately, Victorique was alone, opening a piece of paper secretly taken from the corpse's cameo brooch.

Her face turned pale. Before she even had time to think, she tied the paper tightly around the leg of the pigeon perched on her shoulder.

She turned her gaze to the darkening evening sky, uneasy and terrified.

An owl hooted. It felt like she was in a deep forest, not the city of Saubreme.

She looked around. Again an owl sounded, long and full of sorrow, as though in response to the little girl.

"Maman!" Victorique's lips trembled in fear. "This is not good. A headless corpse of a noblewoman was found in the grave of the dancer Nicole Leroux, but it cannot be her. A short letter from a brooch. This is not good. A secret that could threaten our lives lurks here."

An owl cried once more.

Crows continued to circle the spire, black wings spread wide. What was a single crow had now increased to four, looking down at the mysterious corpse.

"No one must know of this letter. Or none of us will return alive. Maman!"

"There you are." Her brother's voice came from behind.

The dove immediately flew into the sky. Without looking back, it soared towards the direction of the church, and eventually vanished from sight.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing." Victorique turned around.

Inspector Blois, with his pointy, golden cannon, was smiling contentedly. A white rabbit was sitting on his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Victorique asked.

“The little guy’s surprisingly heavy. My arms were getting tired, so I put it on my shoulder.”

“I see. Knock yourself out.” She tilted her head. “I was deep in thought, is all.”

“Are you sure?” There was suspicion in Inspector Blois’s voice. “You were acting weird just now!”

“No, I wasn’t. And I don’t want to hear that from someone who’s always acting weird.”

Inspector Blois gnashed his teeth. The rabbit sniffed, watching the inspector dubiously from up close.

Victorique returned to the group as if nothing had happened. Her face had already regained its icy expression. There was neither fear nor panic in her deep, green eyes.

Kazuya finally finished his prayer and stood up, looking at Victorique.

“This body must be examined,” Marquis de Blois murmured.

Everyone’s breath came out in white puffs. It was getting darker, and colder. Dead leaves fell onto heads, shoulders, shoes. The wind blew, rippling the hair and scarves of everyone present. A crow cawed overhead.

“Gentlemen,” Victorique said. “I have gathered the fragments of chaos.” She looked around. “They are currently being toyed with within me, reconfigured, and slowly reaching the truth.”

Marquis de Blois and the officials of the Ministry of the Occult all regarded Victorique’s face. Kazuya drew closer to her in defense, and so did Ms. Cecile.

“Let us head back to the theater.”

“I see. That could only mean one thing.” Marquis de Blois chuckled eerily. It sounded like the door to hell opening.

Looking up into his face, the pale-faced Victorique nodded. A wisp of white smoke rose from her pipe.

A cold wind blew.

“It’s showtime,” she declared forcefully.

Carriages and automobiles pulled up on the pavement in front of the Phantom Theater, and dressed-up people disembarked. Feathers on the ladies’ hats, the men’s intricate walking sticks, and the ribbons in the hair of young girls glittered in the evening sunlight.

Dry leaves rustled in the wind. The sun was setting, and its magnificent light, soft as fresh cream, fell on the cold buildings and cobblestones.

The traffic was heavy, and the front of the theater was especially festive. Guests who had come to watch the revival of 'The Blue Rose of Saubreme,' due to start soon, were entering excitedly through the doors that resembled the mouth of a giant lion. Passersby walking along the pavement looked up at the theater's signboard and nodded, their eyes flickering with interest. Hooves clattered as carriages rode away.

Inside the Phantom, the spacious floor, covered with a red carpet, chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, was already filled with guests. Their murmurs sounded like a giant creature's sigh.

At the far end of the floor, the door leading to the first-floor seating area was already open. Dark-purple seats were lined up in rows inside. The seats on the first and second floor were already half-filled. Guests were talking with their companies.

In the middle of the first floor were splendid seats, occupied by an odd trio.

Sitting in the middle was a fine young woman with fiery red hair and freckled cheeks. She was sitting with her coat still on, for some reason. The apron peeking out from under indicated that she rushed here without much planning.

The woman—Sophie, the dorm mother—was lifting the photograph on her lap, plates and teacups, smiling. She had bought a lot of Coco Rose goods at the shop, it seemed. She grabbed a blue fan and opened it. It depicted Queen Coco with her right palm on her cheek and her right elbow resting on the back of her left hand, wearing a melancholic expression on her face. Sophie's smile grew wider. She liked it.

Sitting to the right of her was a man who looked like a government official, wearing a sour look. He was one of the two men she bumped into at the entrance of the theater and gave her a ticket by chance. His companion called him Roget. For reasons unknown, he was staring at the stage curtain grimly when he was here to watch a play. His face was ferocious, as though a sworn enemy lurked on the other side.

To Sophie's left sat a classy gentleman with a hat pulled low over his eyes. Apparently, he had mistakenly given her the ticket to the middle seat.

The two gentlemen did not talk much, perhaps because there was a stranger sitting between them.

The classy man was gazing blankly at the curtains. He occasionally glanced at Sophie's purchases and shuddered in fear for some reason.

The show would start soon.

When Sophie studied her haul again, the man sitting to her left suddenly stood up.

Startled, the man to her right looked up. "What's wrong, Your Majesty?!"

"I have a bad feeling in my gut. I can't relax."

"The sensation of having a bad feeling in one's gut has been around since time immemorial," the other man said. "Scientifically, it's because your mind sounds an alarm when you see or hear something that could cause worry, but you're not aware of it. You must've seen or heard something, and your mind is alerting you."

"We'll watch the play tomorrow. I..." He paused and shook his head listlessly.

His hat tipped to the side a bit, showing his short, neatly-combed blond hair. His face was slender and somewhat bony.

The men stood up.

"Excuse us, Mademoiselle," one said.

And then they left.

"Are they not going to watch?" Sophie wondered. "Strange bunch."

For a while she observed her purchase eagerly. She looked around and saw more and more guests coming in.

"I, uh..." she mumbled anxiously. She got up her seat and put a hand to her cheek. "I... I'm gonna buy more Coco Rose stuff!" she declared.

As she shuffled across the floor, she remembered something.

"I gotta buy Cecile a souvenir. She gets lonely easily. She looks quiet but she's actually very irritable. She gets mad when she finds out I went to the city alone. So I always invite her when I come to Saubreme for shopping. Ah, fine." Shrugging, she hurried away.

"She's a noble at heart, but she works hard every day as a professional. I'm the only one she can rely on. She's such a handful..."

While walking, someone small sprinted to Sophie's direction and kicked her shin as hard as possible.

“Ouch!” Sophie whirled around. “Who kicked me?!”

Standing there was Ms. Cecile, her cheeks puffed up like balloons.

Sophie blinked curiously. “If it isn’t Cecile,” she muttered. She wasn’t angry. “What are you doing...” She leaped to the side.

Ms. Cecile’s second strike missed, and she face-planted on the floor.

A moment earlier...

Victorique and the group had just returned to the Phantom Theater by carriage.

Everyone watched each other in silence, faces grim. What they saw earlier—the headless corpse of a noblewoman in an old-fashioned dress, and her decomposed head with a gleaming gold tooth—came back to them, sending a shiver down their spine like a curse from the ancient past.

Kazuya sat firmly beside Victorique, determined not to go anywhere. The Blois father-and-son were expressionless. Ms. Cecile had long removed her round glasses. Large tears glimmered in her droopy eyes.

Upon reaching the theater, they all disembarked. Ms. Cecile put her glasses back on.

“What did you learn?” Marquis de Blois suddenly groaned. “Tell me, now.” His voice was sharp.

Kazuya readied himself. Victorique was silent for a moment.

“Let us go inside first,” she said finally. “And then the show will begin.”

Marquis de Blois exhaled sharply.

Like a party exploring the inside of a beast, they stepped into the lion’s mouth.

The venue was stuffy and filled with the din of footsteps and conversation. Women in fine dresses and suited men with walking sticks were all looking forward to the show, heading for the shops and engaging in fun conversations.

As they turned left to go down a narrow corridor, Ms. Cecile suddenly bolted towards the middle of the floor.

Astonished, they all followed her with their gazes. Soon after, there was a familiar voice.

As Kazuya pushed his way through the crowd, he found Ms. Cecile and Sophie, fighting like young siblings.

“Why didn’t you invite me?!”

“I didn’t have the time. Anyway, what are you doing here in Saubreme?”

“I came in a suitcase. While you took a motorbike!” She slapped Sophie again and again.

“What are you talking about?”

It was Ms. Cecile who was angry, and Sophie was only explaining herself with a smirk.

Sophie laughed dryly. “Oh, shut up already. Who cares if I go out alone once in a while? Not like you like plays anyway.”

“No!”

“What? No?” Sophie blinked. Then she put her hands on her hips, threw her head back, and laughed. “You’re so weird!”

“Wh-Why?!”

“Because when I met you six years ago, I was just an invisible maid, and you were a noble lady. Every day I would wipe the sweat from my forehead as I wiped the windows and swept the floor, and I would watch you during class. Unlike me, Miss Lafitte was cute, happy, and always cheerful. It never occurred to me back then that I’d ever have the chance to have even a single word of conversation with you.”

Ms. Cecile grunted.

“Time has passed. Though your family has gone bankrupt, you’ve become a full-fledged working woman, teaching every day. And your students respect you.”

She looked at Kazuya and Victorique, then nodded. Kazuya was about to interject, but a sharp glare from Ms. Cecile silenced him.

“I spend my days washing and peeling potatoes, cutting carrots, while watching you in class through the windows. The desk had changed to a platform, but you’re still in a classroom, a magnificent place I could never enter. What I mean is, you’re still the same princess beyond the window.”

“What are you saying?”

“It’s just funny that you’re acting like a child just because I went out by myself. If I told the old me about this, she would’ve just smiled sadly and wouldn’t have believed me.”

“But we’re friends.” Ms. Cecile, her cheeks puffed out like balloons, stared sharply at her.

Sophie continued laughing merrily.

Stooping, Kazuya stepped in between them. “Now, now.” He tried to intercede like some wise old man. “Let us calm down, yeah? Ouch!”

“Men should keep quiet.”

“Besides, you’re just a kid.”

“Oh, come on. I’m just saying, you should calm down and try to reach a compromise. There’s a system in my country called ‘It takes two to make a quarrel.’ No, wait a minute. I think it’s a saying, not a system. Anyway... Ouch! Can you please stop?!”

“Huh? Roget?” Ms. Cecile said. “Who’s that?”

Kazuya’s breath seized in his throat.

Victorique, who had been watching the squabble, gave Kazuya a look that said to keep quiet. Kazuya nodded.

Just like that, the heated argument between the two women had ended without even a compromise; being longtime friends, they shared the same wavelength.

“Let’s watch together,” Sophie said. “There are empty seats next to mine. There were supposed to be two men sitting there, but the other guy was feeling uneasy so they left. Weird people, I tell you!” She was explaining with gestures.

“Was one of them called Roget?” Cecile asked.

Sophie nodded. “Yeah. Scary-looking guy, looked like a bureaucrat. When I bumped into the other guy at the entrance, he pushed me out of the way. And when I called his companion gramps, he got mad. Besides, isn’t it weird for a couple of men to go to the theater?”

“It is.”

“The other man was classy and quite cool, with short blonde hair combed smoothly. Can you guess his nickname? I almost laughed.”

“A funny nickname... Carp?”

“So close!”

“Close, huh... Flounder?”

“The correct answer is... Your Majesty!”

“Your Majesty? That’s just mean. It’s borderline bullying. If one of my students used it on a classmate, I’d give them a good talking-to. I’ll summon them in the dim teacher’s lounge after school and go on and on. I’d be like, ‘Are you calling him that because you’re good friends? Look at me when you answer. You’re not getting dinner tonight!’”

“Right?!”

“Wait a minute. I wasn’t close at all! Why are you always like this to me?!”

Victorique once again commanded Kazuya with a look.

“Um, excuse me. Please don’t fight,” Kazuya broke in, forcing himself between the two women. “I’ll keep things in order!”

“Back off.”

“No, I won’t. As Victorique puts it, I am but a dull simpleton. But keeping things in order is one of my forte.”

“Hold it,” Ms. Cecile said. “I won’t let a student of mine berate himself like this. You have a lot of good points—”

“Yeah, yeah. I understand. Now, allow me to continue.” Kazuya’s back hunched even more. “Dorm mother. One of the two men you ran into you at the entrance was named Roget, an bureaucrat-looking man, correct?”

“Yup.”

“The other was a classy, middle-aged man with short blonde hair, addressed by his companion as ‘Your Majesty’.”

“Ahuh.” Sophie nodded. “Oh, yeah. He mentioned something about being undercover. I wonder what he meant by that.”

“I see.” Squirming like a snail, Kazuya returned to Victorique, who was watching him with no expression on her face. Her green eyes flickered under the light of the chandelier. “So, Victorique. His Majesty and Roget came to the theater in secret. If he’s the Roget that’s pulled some strings in this case, then his companion can only be him.”

“Yes.”

“I wonder why, though.” Kazuya looked confused. “Then again, it’s a play about his queen. I understand why he’d want to sneak out to watch.”

Victorique nodded. Her deep, green eyes twinkled sadly, and her glossy cherry lips were pursed tight. She seemed to be hiding her nervousness. Concerned, Kazuya watched her tiny face with a frown.

The show was about to begin. There were considerably fewer people in the open floor now, and the buzz coming from the audience beyond the doors was growing louder.

Victorique took a slow drag of her pipe. “Sophie. There are two empty seats next to you, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“In that case, Kujou, Cecile, you go watch the play from there.”

“No,” Kazuya replied.

A group of officials from the Ministry of the Occult had gathered behind Victorique. They drew closer silently and soon surrounded everyone. Their faces were all devoid of emotion, empty like the homunculus that Marquis de Blois had once dreamed of creating, and terrifying at the same time.

Victorique took a step back. The men surrounded her.

Kazuya’s face stiffened. “I’m going with you.”

“This is as far as you go, Kujou.”

“But...”

“It’s okay.” Victorique’s voice dropped to a sigh. “I have my *maman*. A big hand always there to protect me.”

“B-But...”

“This matter involves state secrets to begin with. You’re an international student first, and my friend second. You are studying here in a foreign country on a government grant so you would grow to become a valuable personnel who would serve his own nation.”

“Victorique.”

“Your country and Sauville might be allies now, but who knows what will happen in the next storm? A very different map of forces than the first storm, a change so great that it will shake even the places of land and sea, and what will happen to your position.”

Kazuya went silent at the mention of his country.

“It’s dangerous from here on out.”

“Vic...”

Looking at the sorrowful face of her friend, Victorique bade goodbye in a hard voice. “Farewell, Kujou. My one and only, precious friend.”

The last part only reached Kazuya’s ears.

Her voice when she said the word ‘friend’ sounded like a sad declaration of love that would remain in Kazuya’s mind for the rest of his life. He silently accepted it.

Victorique turned her gaze away from Kazuya. Surrounded by the officials, she turned and walked away.

A mind that could shake the world, a descendant of the ancient tribe of Saillune, a human weapon hidden by the Old World.

For all that, she looked nothing more than a small child. Her hair swayed like a golden river flowing into the far distance.

Kazuya stood stock still.

A buzzer sounded, announcing the start of the Blue Rose of Saubreme.

Victorique is right. I'm just an international student from an allied country. I came here with a government's grant so I could serve my nation in the future.

Kazuya studied his palms. Small, pale hands. Not those of a grown man. But he wasn't a child anymore either.

What could these hands of his protect?

No. Sure, I have a duty to uphold. But there's also someone I need to protect. I'm a foreign national first, and a friend second? No...

Kazuya looked back at the door leading to the guest seating.

Sophie pulled on Cecile's hand. She glanced at him and gestured him to hurry up.

He looked toward the narrow corridor where Victorique was taken away.

"Kujou!" Sophie called.

Kazuya looked up to the heavens.

Pressing his feet firmly on the red-carpeted floor, he broke into a run.

Mechanical Turk 4

A dove flew over.

I stretched my hands high into the sky and caught it. A white bird with a message that could save the life of the little Gray Wolf—my daughter.

Brian and I were perched by the church's bell like birds in the darkness of night. It was evening outside, and the sinking sun shone brightly on the cemetery, but here it was dark, where we could stay undetected.

Only one Brian was with me tonight; the other had a magic show. He gave me a sharp glare.

They were leaving the cemetery. One after another they entered the carriage parked in the alley. For a while Brian watched Albert de Blois with a fierce expression, canines bared, then turned to me.

"We should head to Phantom as well," he said.

"Yes."

"A familiar place."

Brian brushed his flaming hair up his face. I looked up at him.

"I found you in the basement hall of the theater. Singing and dancing."

"A tale from the past."

"There are three kinds of pasts. Those that are easily forgotten. Those that are recorded in the mind as fond memories. And then one more." He stretched in the manner of a big cat, which made him look even taller.

"Those that remain vividly on the flesh forever, ones that make you feel like you're still in that moment. In short, eternal."

"Eternal..."

I looked away.

The memory of giving birth to her in that horrifying stone tower flashed in my mind.

An eternal moment that never went away, like a gaping wound.

I felt as if I were still in the stone tower, stretching my skinny hand to my little daughter as she was being taken away. I wonder if I am still trapped in that moment.

Brian started down the spire's narrow spiral staircase. "What was on the paper?" he asked.

I snapped back to my senses. I untied the paper attached to the dove's leg and opened it.

It was inside the brooch that was on the headless corpse.

The paper contained delicate writing. In French. The handwriting suggested that it was written by a woman.

I read it out aloud.

"My dear sorcerer,

God has sent down lightning to strike our mutual sin.

I have given birth to a demon child.

I will surely pay for it with my life in the near future.

I pray that this brooch will be buried with me.

And reach you in the worlds between.

Together in solitude."

"What does it mean?"

"CC..." I shuddered. "This is probably Coco Rose's letter."

"You're telling me that the body from Nicole Leroux's grave had a letter from the queen tucked inside it? But why? And the letter suggests she knew that she would get killed." Brian's green eyes narrowed.

"Yes." I nodded.

A crow cried ominously outside the church. I mimicked an owl's hoot in response.

The crow flapped its wings. I shook my head.

"And this dear sorcerer. Don't tell me..."

"Leviathan the Alchemist, if I had to guess," I replied. "The queen probably gave birth to a child—not the king's, but the alchemist's—after he disappeared in the clock tower, driven out by the king and the Academy of Science."

"I can't believe it."

"The people were told that the failed childbirth had left the queen distressed, and she holed herself up in the country house. But that wasn't the case. A child was, in fact, born. A demon child. In other words..."

"In other words, what?"

"Don't you get it?" I lowered my voice so God wouldn't hear. "The alchemist was African. Therefore the child was of mixed blood, just like my

daughter, who was born between a Gray Wolf and Sauville's nobility. The long-awaited first child of the royal family, born by the Queen of Sauville, had lustrous dark skin."

Brian stopped in his tracks. The stone spiral staircase was cold, and our breath was frosty.

His hair alone burned bright red.

"But there's no such child anywhere. Not by the king's side, or anywhere else."

"At this point, we don't know where the child disappeared to. A dreadful thing, to be sure. When Coco Rose saw the baby, she feared for her life, so she wrote a letter, or rather a will. And she slipped it into her brooch."

We started down the stairs once more. We were almost on the ground.

"But while she was under house arrest, she lived for another fourteen years. Then in 1914, fourteen years after giving birth, she was murdered in the royal palace."

"So what does this letter tell us?"

"One is the secret of Coco Rose's childbirth. And the second is a clue to who killed her. Either way." I exhaled softly. "This letter is my daughter's lifeline. As long as we keep it safe, neither the royal family nor the Academy of Science can lay a hand on her. It will serve the same purpose as the red memento box we keep for our own safety."

Brian grunted.

We made it to the surface. We opened the door and stepped out. The evening sun's dazzling yet lonely rays fell on the surroundings.

"So Queen Coco's will will keep your daughter alive."

"Yes."

"Then you best hold on to it dearly, Cordelia."

"Thank you, Brian."

Brian's face contorted faintly.

The crow kept circling ominously.

The exhumed body was being carried somewhere. The officials, wearing gloomy looks, gave instructions to the transporters.

And we turned our backs to them. We walked through the alley.

Brian ran his fingers through my hair, then pulled away.

I opened my lips.

And mimicked an owl's cry.

Hoot, hoot.

Brian, too, howled like a beast.

An old man walking his dog was coming in our direction. When he noticed us, he gave a slight nod, but the dog was paralyzed with fear and refused to take a step, no matter how hard the owner pulled on the leash.

It gave a short, frightened yelp and cast its eyes down. The old man regarded us with suspicion.

We walked slowly past them.

A dead leaf blown by the wind glided before us, and Brian crushed it with his foot.

My hand held Coco Rose's will tight.

Chapter 5: The show must go on!

A boy was running down the corridor, his jet-black hair flapping.

He had eyes as black as his hair. A boy from the Orient. He was small with a stern face. His pursed lips parted.

“Victorique!”

He called a girl’s name.

Old lamps hung on the walls, casting a dim light that seemed to come from the past. The further the boy went down the narrow corridor, the closer he seemed to draw closer to history’s secrets, down the hole of time.

“Victorique!” mumbled the boy again.

The lamps hissed and flickered ominously.

The boy’s figure and the sound of his footsteps receded into the distance.

Two men were leisurely making their way down another corridor.

The audience’s rumble from the sold-out seats could be heard through the wall. Gradually, the mingled din began to coalesce into a unified cheer.

“Coco! Coco! Coco!”

Fans from the capital of Saubreme—no, from all over Sauville—had gathered here, waiting for the moment when Coco Rose returned from the afterlife and appeared in flesh on the stage. An enormous crowd of Coco’s followers—fathers, brothers, sisters, lovers, friends.

The blond man covered his ears with both hands and shook his head, trying to keep the noise away.

His companion, a man with the air of a bureaucrat, was grim-faced as he listened to the people’s shrieks.

“Why...” the blond man groaned. “Why do they love her so much?”

His companion gave no answer. The two walked down the corridor in silence.

“Coco! Coco! Coco!”

The frenzied cries of the audience swirled throughout the theater like a hurricane.

“Coco!”

“The show must go on,” Victorique muttered.

She was a large, crimson rose, with billowy red dress and pink, glass-like shoes. Her magnificent hair hung down to the floor, giving her the appearance of a luxurious porcelain doll.

She was sitting on a shoddy wooden chair. Its scrollwork was snapped in places, and it made an ominous squeaking sound whenever she moved. She looked somewhat like a captive princess.

The wisp of smoke rising from her pipe wavered forlornly.

They were on the stage wing. The red curtain was down, and props resembling a royal balcony were being prepared. Actors in their costumes and makeup were gathered around the stage, looking nervous. Even now the stage director was still giving out small instructions.

The officials of the Ministry of the Occult surrounded Victorique, while Marquis de Blois sat beside her in a newly-made chair that was carried here from the basement. His son, Inspector Blois, stood beside him, agonizing over a rabbit that was climbing up his head.

The actors and theater were careful not to say anything or even look at the eerie group. No matter what happened backstage, the actors’ job was the same. The show must go on.

Needless to say, the audience’s chanting of Coco’s name reached all the way backstage, their loud cheers rending the air. No wonder. It had been ten years since this popular stageplay was last performed. The crowd had become so loud that they were practically one step short of mass hysteria. They were like children gathered at the entrance to the underworld, screaming frantically as they waited for the resurrection of their dead mother.

“Coco! Coco! Coco!”

An actress playing Coco Rose, wearing an old-fashioned blue dress with puffy sleeves, layers of lace up to the collar, and a cameo brooch shining around her neck, grimaced, feeling the pressure from the chants.

Victorique silently watched her from afar.

The young actress was speechless for a moment, tears welling up in her eyes, when suddenly she struck her signature pose—smiling with her right palm touching her cheek and her elbow on the back of her left hand.

Seconds later, the tension and anxiety left her body, and her face lit up with a rosy brilliance, like a faint glow of hope.

Victorique held the pipe in her mouth, puffing out tobacco smoke. A small smile seemed to appear on her face.

And then...

The curtains rose.

Instantly, an earth-shaking cheer rumbled and shook the pits of their stomachs.

Spotlight.

The actress playing Coco slowly walked out into the light. She looked mystic, as though ready to pass on.

The audience suddenly went quiet, watching the revived queen—tonight's actress—with bated breath and keen eyes, as though appraising the beauty of a living sacrifice.

A grand silence had blanketed the place, as if the god of theater had arrived.

"There's no business like show business," the actor playing King Rupert mumbled. "We became actors because we wanted to. One day we will grow old, our voice will become hoarse, and we will no longer be able to perform on stage. But ladies and men, let us remember this applause. For it will remain in our ears, in our bodies, in our hearts, to comfort us in our lonely nights."

The actors, too, were watching from the wings of the stage with bated breath. Ginger Pie, playing the role of the Queen Mother, stood with her chin raised, but the handkerchief in her hand was crumpled from the nerves.

A moment later, cheers for Coco erupted once more, louder than before. The audience had accepted the young actress as Queen.

Relieved, the whole cast exchanged small smiles. Then they immersed themselves in their roles and turned silent once more.

"Tomorrow, I leave for Sauville and bid farewell to France. Will the people of Sauville welcome me? Will His Majesty love me? Ah, my last night is filled with anxiety!"

The lonely voice of Coco Rose, a seventeen-year-old French girl, resounded.

The audience watched the actress in silence. Everyone knew her future. The people welcomed her, but His Majesty Rupert never showed her love.

Her life was short, and far from rosy.

Victorique looked away from the stage. She gazed at Marquis de Blois sitting on the other side and the bureaucrats surrounding him.

She pointed to the stage. “There’s a concept called zero hour,” she began.

Marquis de Blois’s brows twitched. His monocles glinted coldly.

In the shadowy backstage area, it seemed as if an invisible spotlight was shining eerily on Victorique and Marquis de Blois. Victorique stared straight at her own dreadful father, Marquis Albert de Blois, a leading figure in the Ministry of the Occult.

The actor playing His Majesty the King appeared on stage, and the wedding preparations began.

Actors danced to the sound of music.

Victorique was as expressionless as ice, as though trained from birth to suppress all emotions—anger, hatred, tedium, ennui, and sometimes joy.

The lamp on the old table flickered. Music rolled in from the stage.

Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth. “Zero hour is when an incident actually occurs,” she said in a deep, husky voice. “But it’s often misinterpreted, making it harder to see the truth.”

Like an old woman, her voice was devoid of innocence and delicacy. For a long time like her mother, she was locked up in a stone tower, ignorant of the outside world, with only books to barely link her with what lay out there—knowledge, discovery, love, and sorrow. The howling, crying, screaming, had robbed her voice of its sweetness and tenderness.

The passage of time had turned her voice quiet and mysterious, like an old hermit living in the forest.

“At the moment,” she said, pointing at the stage. A wedding ceremony was being held under the spotlight. His Majesty Rupert, wearing a white cloak and a large crown, was standing next to Queen Coco, who was hanging her head. “It’s the year 1897. Not yet zero hour.”

“Explain yourself.”

“Let’s be patient. We’re getting there.” Victorique’s voice dropped lower. “Soon the zero hour will arrive. That is, the moment when Queen Coco was murdered.”

“What are you talking about?” Marquis de Blois snorted. His voice was deep, icy, dreadful. “That would be 1914. Everyone in the kingdom knows

that, not just government officials. It's still a long way off."

"You are wrong, Father." Victorique shook her head. "The Wellspring of Wisdom disagrees. Queen Coco dies..." She paused.

On the stage, the wedding ceremony went off without a hitch.

Next came the quarrel between His Majesty and the Queen in the bedchamber. The Queen's inclination for the occult. The appearance of Leviathan, the masked alchemist.

The play progressed slowly but sensationally.

1900.

The queen's bedroom. A conversation between the Queen, whose belly was getting bigger, and her maid, who followed her from France. The arrival of the Queen Mother. Her expectations.

"Oh, may my son's first child be a man who will one day succeed the throne. May he be handsome too, with blond hair and blue eyes."

But the queen failed to give birth. Lying in bed, she cried.

"Now," Victorique said curtly.

"What do you mean by 'now'?" Marquis de Blois asked grimly.

"Now is when Queen Coco dies."

"What?"

"Someone stabbed her in the chest."

"What in the world are you on about?!"

Queen Coco wept herself to sleep on a luxurious, canopied bed, holding her chest in pain. Her maid was accompanying her.

Victorique pointed at the scene. "Look. She's dead from a stab wound," she repeated.

"Nonsense!"

"Blackout."

With a startling sound effect, the stage went dark.

In the darkness, the props for the royal palace were cleared away and replaced with those of the country house. Sobs of women who empathized with Queen Coco came from the audience. A familiar voice—the dorm mother Sophie's, most likely—reached Victorique's ears.

"Queen Coco is dead," she said, keeping her expression still.

"Explain!" the Marquis roared.

"As of 1900, someone had already killed her. I would surmise that it was an impulsive murder, not premeditated. The body was probably embalmed.

At around the same time, there was a search for an impostor in Saubreme.”

“What do you mean?”

“An ad looking for a secretary appeared in the newspaper. But for a secretary position, the requirements were rather specific. Blonde hair, blue eyes, even their height and the size of their feet. The salary was so high that it attracted blonde beauties from all over Saubreme.”

Victorique paused.

From the pitch-dark stage, the actress playing Queen Coco, who had finished her performance, returned to the backstage. One would’ve thought her footsteps to be jaunty, but they were calm, each step careful and firm.

“As luck would have it, there was a woman who looked exactly like the dead Coco Rose,” Victorique continued. “She was a dancer at the theater, and her resemblance to Coco Rose had earned her the nickname ‘Downtown Blue Rose’. She had plenty of admirers as well. The men who placed the ad in the newspaper hired the woman—Nicole Leroux.”

“Why?”

“Simple.”

Up ahead, the actress playing Queen Coco, who would most likely receive critical acclaim on tomorrow’s morning paper, quickly catapulting her to stardom, stood still with a serious look on her face.

Another actress, her brown hair dyed golden, walked slowly toward her. She had long hair hanging down and wore a blue dress made of soft fabric, with ample opening around the chest area. They were wearing similar make-up. In the dimness, they looked like twin sisters, with similar facial features but completely different personalities.

“To have her become Queen Coco’s double. Because the real Queen is dead.”

The actresses raised their arms and slapped each other’s palms. A baton pass.

“I’m so scared,” the woman with the hair hanging down said, her lips quivering nervously. “I don’t know if I can act as well as you. You were so amazing. I can’t follow that up.”

“You’ll be fine,” the first actress reassured. “Coco Rose changed since she moved to the country house, like she was a different person altogether. You just have to do your thing. Act out your version of Coco. Go on, it’s your turn to be on stage. Good luck!”

“Thank you. Good luck!”

Spotlights once more illuminated the stage, where props for a country house stood, modest but lovely.

The second actress walked out with a spring in her steps.

She had the cheer that Queen Coco of the royal court never had. A woman one step short of frivolity. But it was this brilliant spirit that remained in people’s minds.

The audience welcomed the second actress with a warm applause.

“I have left the glamor of the palace,” the actress began, “but this place is just as beautiful. The air is clean, and it’s close to nature. It makes me want to sing. At the royal banquet, I was reluctant to dance in front of the nobles, but here there are only the few servants and the animals in the forest to see me.”

She recited the long line in one breath, with a lonely but at the same time easy air of being freed from a spell. Then she began dancing gracefully in the middle of the stage.

Victorique pointed at her. “The zero hour has passed. From here on, it’s a long wait until the next murder.”

“The next murder?”

Victorique chuckled. “I’ll explain it later. For now, the real Queen Coco was killed in the royal palace. The Coco Rose that moved to the country house to recuperate was an impostor. No one from the palace accompanied her, and her servants were probably all changed. The maid from France was also not in the country house either.”

Victorique took a puff of her pipe as she stared at Coco Rose—no, Nicole Leroux, who was dancing quietly onstage.

“Just like this play, Coco Rose was played by two different people. The real Coco Rose died at the same time as the first actress left the stage, and the appearance of the second actress coincided with the hiring of the double, Nicole Leroux.”

“I can’t believe it...”

“That is the reason behind Queen Coco Rose’s mysterious, multifaceted nature. The one who drank absinthe to relieve her stress was the real Coco. The one who loved wine and drank merrily was the double. Coco was the quiet and shy one. Nicole was the wild one, who went out at night. They happened to look exactly alike, but on the inside, they were complete

opposites. The mischievous hands of fate forced two people to play the role of one woman, which gave Queen Coco a multifaceted character. And so one mystery led to another, and that explains why she's still so popular even ten years after her official death, ironically."

"But..."

"Nicole Leroux was declared dead and buried in a small church. The real Coco Rose was the one who was put in the coffin. That explains why the Downtown Blue Rose, who was supposed to be dead, was spotted by her old friends all over town. She was seen partying at night, having a picnic, and so on. Those who didn't know her thought she was Queen Coco because of her face and luxurious clothes, but those who did know her would have the opposite reaction: 'Why is Nicole dressed like a noblewoman?'"

Victorique brought the pipe to her lips and took a drag. Marquis de Blois, staring at her with a grim face, took a breath.

Victorique blew out smoke. "And so fourteen years passed in the blink of an eye. I don't know if Nicole willingly accepted the job of being a double, or if she was threatened, but there are accounts of her going on picnics and dancing. I can only hope it wasn't all tough times for her. There's no way of knowing what she felt now, of course."

"Hmm."

"Destiny has arrived. It's the year 1914."

"The year that the body of Queen Coco, or as you said her double, Nicole, was found in the palace, and her head in the country house."

"Yes."

Victorique pointed to the stage.

The props had been rearranged, with the royal palace on the left side of the stage and the country house on the right side. Actors played out the events that happened simultaneously.

The royal palace was bustling with people, while the country house had a visitor, and servants were busy doing work.

His Majesty Rupert appeared in the royal palace. Wearing a large crown, he stood with the dignity of a ruler. He was talking with his retainers about something.

Soon a carriage carrying Queen Coco left the country house and headed toward the royal palace. They took their time to make it seem that the two

buildings were far apart. The carriage even rolled onto the hall and made its way slowly up the stairs to the first floor. Some of the guests called out to Queen Coco.

“Don’t go!”

“You’ll get killed!”

One even got angry. “Everyone’s concerned about you, so why are you still going?!”

The carriage rattled onward, slowly.

Two men dressed in French attire showed up at the royal palace.

Victorique pointed to the actors. “1914, just before the start of the Great War. An envoy from France came to the royal palace. He wanted to meet with Queen Coco.”

“Yes.”

“But they couldn’t let Queen Coco see an old acquaintance, or the charade would be exposed, together with the unprecedented murder that occurred fourteen years ago. So, should they kill the French envoy? No, that would be absurd. It would cause a diplomatic issue. So what should they do, then? Queen Coco, that is to say, her double Nicole has arrived.”

The carriage returned to the stage and arrived in front of the royal palace.

Queen Coco, wearing a veiled hat, jumped out of the carriage, unable to hide the spring in her steps.

She was shown to a small room in the royal palace.

At that moment, visitors gathered at the country house and sat in the reception room.

At the palace, His Majesty Rupert entered the small room and exchanged words with Queen Coco.

He left immediately.

It was the French envoy’s turn to enter the room.

The audience, even the actors offstage, swallowed as they waited for the horrifying moment.

Thunder crashed. The spotlights suddenly turned red. One fell on the royal palace, and the other on the country house.

Screams and cries rose from the audience. It felt like the whole theater was shaking.

In the royal palace, a headless Coco Rose was standing in the red light. On a closer look, the actress had simply covered her head with a red cloth. Shining a red light on her thus made it look like she was headless.

Screams ripped through the air. From the actor playing the French envoy. From the audience.

Thunder clapped.

Then, something appeared on the wall of the country house. Queen Coco's head! Her eyes were closed, and there was nothing from the neck down.

Victorique looked closer.

The head belonged to the first actress, the one who played the real Queen Coco, who died in 1900. She was standing on the stage with her eyes closed, her body from the neck down covered in a red cloth as well.

A torso in the royal palace, and a head in the country house.

The most tragic murder in the history of the Kingdom of Sauville, remembered by the citizens, still unresolved to this day.

"The culprit had accomplices all along," Victorique said softly. "The people who hired Coco Rose's double."

"Hmm."

"They couldn't let Nicole Leroux meet the French envoy, so she was killed right before their meeting. But if the envoy saw her face, he might see through the ruse. Therefore, the culprit cut off her head."

"But nothing was taken from the room, and no head was found anywhere!"

"As for that..." Victorique looked away. "I-I don't know."

"What?"

"I mean it." She looked away again. "At any rate, the culprit had an accomplice, who opened Nicole Leroux's grave in advance, cut off the head of the real queen, now covered in grave wax, and brought it back. Then, on the day of the murder, said accomplice went to the country house and made the head appear in the country house at about the same time that Nicole Leroux was killed."

"My..."

"Look at the stage. The body in the palace is being played by the second actress, the one playing Nicole. And the head in the country house is being played by the first actress, the real Coco. When you think about it, the play

is surprisingly realistic. Because in reality, the body found in the palace was Nicole's and the head seen in the country house was Coco's—two different dead women."

"..."

"I think the audience here tonight, the representatives of the people, Coco's Children, all feel it subconsciously. Tonight's frenzy is that unforgettable. A truly wonderful show."

Victorique brought her chubby palms together and clapped twice.

Marquis de Blois gave a low groan.

On stage, the floating head in the country house began to burn. A burning cloth was placed in front of the actress's face to create the effect. Shrieks came from the audience.

"After showing the head to the visitors, it had to be burned. If they looked at it for too long, they would have realized that it was not fresh, but from an old corpse covered in wax."

"Hmm."

"Nicole Leroux's head was placed in Nicole's grave, where Coco Rose's body lay. Thus Coco's body and Nicole's head rest in one grave. The gold tooth matches the one in the dancer's portrait, so that's for certain. While Queen Coco's burned head and Nicole's body were placed in Coco's luxurious grave. That is the truth behind the murder of Coco Rose."

"But..." Marquis de Blois stood up.

Tragic music rolled in from the stage. The play was coming to an end.

Wearing a savage look, the Marquis shook the little cub's shoulders over and over. "Who killed her?! That's what we want to know! Coco Rose was killed not in 1914, but fourteen years prior. Everyone since then was fooled by the double. A shocking truth, to be sure. But what we at the Ministry of the Occult really want to know is who the culprit is! The evidence!"

Victorique looked away. She put the pipe in her glossy lips and removed it.

"That was too long ago," she said.

Marquis de Blois glared at her.

Music came from the stage, and the audience was quiet.

"Do you really not know?!" The Marquis tightened his grip on her shoulders and shook her wildly, as though wanting to break her. The intense force would have ripped a doll's arms and legs.

Victorique grit her teeth and snapped her eyes open. “There are things that even I do not know!” she growled.

Marquis de Blois’s arms did not stop.

“The passage of time obscures truth. I really can’t see the face of Queen Coco’s murderer. I strain my eyes, but all I can see is the crime’s black pillar of smoke. It happens. That’s why it’s the past. Some things can never be recovered.”

Marquis de Blois gritted his teeth in frustration. Slowly, he let go. His eyes quivered ominously behind his monocle.

“Again,” he mumbled low. “Leviathan left, the Queen was taken, and the culprit slipped through my hands.”

The curtains fell quietly.

The actors returned. Their faces were calm, but flushed. Eventually the music ended, and with a jolt like an earthquake, the audience gave a round of applause.

“Bravo! Bravo!” they cheered.

The actors held hands and returned to the stage. His Majesty Rupert fixed the crown with one hand before escorting the Queen Mother.

Slowly, the curtain rose once more. A curtain call. A huge wave of applause followed.

Exchanging glances and holding hands, the two main actresses—the girls who played Coco and Nicole—ran out onto the stage. The applause grew louder.

Remember this moment. The memory of the cheers and applause will light up your lonely nights when you are old and alone. There is no business like show business. Live on stage, young ones.

Offstage in the dim light, Marquis de Blois’s shoulders were trembling. A moment later, he turned his back on the cub and turned to leave. The officials of the Ministry of the Occult followed. Inspector Blois rushed after his father, holding the rabbit above his head. The creature, with an unconcerned air, was sitting on top of the golden cannon like a witch on a broomstick.

Victorique, left alone, stirred forlornly on the shabby wooden chair. There was a squeak. Underneath her icy, cold, emotionless, doll-like expression, was intense agitation. She had been sitting in a wobbly and

noisy chair, but not once did it make even the slightest creak. Like a motionless puppet, she faced her terrifying father alone, hiding her fear.

Victorique slowly closed her eyes.

“Bravo!” the audience cheered.

The actors on stage, the crew gathered offstage, hugged each other, smiling and holding hands.

In the shadowy space, Victorique sat alone.

Her eyelids quivered.

Someone came for it from the darkness.

Their breath was hot. Sweat dripped from their forehead, temple, neck, like it was the middle of summer, not winter. Black leather gloves squeaked. Eyes watched the prey—Victorique de Blois—closely.

The Gray Wolf was still small. It was much prettier than he had feared and imagined from the rumors, yet at the same time astonishingly frail. This frightened the man. The gloves squeaked again as he clenched his hands into fists. It struck him that now... now was the time to take its life. The pup was sitting alone in a shabby wooden chair. The men who had surrounded her earlier were gone, and the actors were in the middle of their curtain call. Right now the Gray Wolf was in a dangerous place, out of anyone’s sight. It was a miracle—no, a God-given opportunity. The man signaled his subordinate standing beside him, and with silent footsteps, he approached Victorique from behind.

The closer he got to the Gray Wolf pup, the more he realized how tiny she was. She was reported to have been born fourteen years ago, but she looked more like a small, helpless child. Her golden hair swept down to the floor like a mighty and bountiful river flowing through a kingdom of gold. Wrapped in a bright-red taffeta dress, she looked like a bouquet forgotten on a chair. Her sleeves were puffy like rosebuds, and the ornaments on her small, pink hat swayed softly like smooth cream.

The man slowly extended his gloved hands to grab Victorique’s slender neck. To silently pluck a legendary flower that was destined to bloom one day. Gloves touched her neck. The man put strength in his hands.

Suddenly his body lurched. Something had hit him hard from behind. The man turned around. Startled, his subordinate braced himself, and a silent scuffle broke out. The subordinate grabbed whoever it was that

slammed onto them. Their figure was small and slim; they seemed to be a foe not to be feared, but they were unexpectedly quick, full of will and strength to fight.

The subordinate loosened his grip. Sensing this, the figure stepped away from the men.

The man lifted his head and stared at the sudden intruder with surprise and displeasure.

“Get away from Victorique.”

Hearing Kazuya’s voice, Victorique looked over her shoulder.

The applause continued raining down to the stage, where the actors were standing in the light of the curtain call. There was only supposed to be Victorique left offstage. But behind stood two men, and Kazuya Kujou.

The men exchanged glances, then stepped forward, squinting at Kazuya, sizing him up. Determined to stand his ground, Kazuya braced himself in front of Victorique, his chest puffed out and his arms outstretched. The men observed him for a moment, then stopped.

The men and the boy stared each other down. Kazuya was small and slim even for a boy, but his whole body was brimming with the will to fight.

“Kujou,” Victorique muttered. “I thought you were in the audience with Cecile and Sophie.”

“Of course not! I was looking for you. I was worried.”

“Hmm. I see.” Victorique nodded. “No wonder I couldn’t hear you crying.”

“I-I wouldn’t cry from watching the play! A man is only allowed to cry three times in his life. When his parents die, when his child dies, and when he himself dies. No, wait. I got the last one wrong. I can’t remember. What was it again?”

“Be quiet.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“You were worried?” the man asked in a deep voice.

His golden hair, short and combed smooth, peeked out from inside his deep hat. He carried himself in a sophisticated and dignified manner. The other man behind him, as Sophie had explained, had the look of a bureaucrat, and his whole appearance seemed colorless, his presence itself monochromatic.

“What an odd thing to say,” the blond man said. “You appear to be Asian. Worried about a Gray Wolf?” He jerked his chin toward Victorique. “Do you even know how terrifying a creature she is? Trust me. You don’t need to worry about her.”

“I know what Victorique is. But I worry about her as a friend. Because no matter how fearsome she is...” Kazuya walked cautiously, positioning himself between Victorique and the men. “She’s so tiny! Ouch!”

“Don’t you ever call me tiny again.”

“Now, look here. This isn’t the time to get angry about small things! Just keep quiet. This man was just about to kill you. I thought they were acting strange, so I followed them, and they were eavesdropping on you guys from the shadows the whole time. And then, as soon as you were alone, they made their move.” Kazuya turned to the man.

The man stared back at the boy with blue eyes that gleamed like jewels.

The applause from the audience never stopped. It was as if it would go on forever.

A momentary eternity known as glory. A glorious memory that would be remembered forever.

A light that would illuminate days of gloom.

Kazuya glowered at the man. “You’re His Majesty—”

“Not another word, Kujou.”

“What?”

“Don’t ever mention that man’s name.”

“Why not? It’s obvious who he is.”

“Because it’s dangerous.” Victorique shook her head.

The men glared hatefully at the tiny figure.

Victorique smoked her pipe. “For now, let’s just address him as ‘he’.”

“Okay...”

“Now, then. As a matter of fact, I wanted to have a word with you two gentlemen. You honor me with your presence. Kujou said that you were listening while I was explaining the mystery to my father. That makes things easier. I’m sure you’re well aware.”

Victorique paused. A wisp of white smoke wafted from the pipe.

The men, tight-faced, listened quietly.

“That I left a few things out earlier.”

“...”

“Two, in fact.” Victorique’s lips curved faintly into what seemed to be a smile. “One: the identity of the culprit behind the murder of Coco Rose in 1900 and Nicole Leroux in 1914. Two: how the culprit killed Nicole in the royal palace and made her head vanish.”

“You told your father you didn’t know,” the blond man said.

This time Victorique flashed a clear smile. Then, her expression turned icy cold. Her smile was haughty and chilling, unlike the somewhat fragile one she showed to Kazuya.

“There is nothing I do not know,” she said.

“You jest.”

“I’ve unraveled the whole mystery, of course. I just didn’t tell Father, the Ministry of the Occult, the whole truth.”

“Preposterous!”

“I can’t mention his name, but he—that is, the culprit—committed the first murder in the year 1900. On impulse, if I had to guess. He must have seen the first child that Queen Coco gave birth to, the child that would have been heir to the throne if it was a boy.”

The man’s face twisted bitterly. “How much do you know?”

“Everything.” Victorique’s voice was level. “The child was demonspawn, with glossy dark skin. It was not his child. The queen had given birth to a child of adultery. Either with a black man, or a Moor. Who the father was exactly was unknown, but he was not from the kingdom. An unpardonable sin.”

“...”

“In a fit of rage, he stabbed the queen.”

“...”

“Did he regret it afterwards or not? Did he love the queen from the bottom of his heart, or did he never love her at all? I don’t know. But the queen is dead. That much is certain.”

“How did you know?” the man demanded.

“I found Queen Coco’s will,” Victorique answered calmly. “From her body, hidden in Nicole Leroux’s grave. It was hidden inside a cameo brooch.”

“What?!”

“He then ordered his trusted men—people from the Academy of Science whom he had strengthened his ties with—to clean up the mess. They found

a lookalike, made her officially dead, and buried Queen Coco in her grave. Fourteen years passed without incident. But just before the Great War, an envoy from France wished to see Queen Coco. Fearing that she would be exposed as an impostor, he committed another murder. He killed the queen's double as well."

"But how did he do it?" the man asked grimly. "There was only one door to the room where the fake Queen Coco was. A servant entered, talked with the queen, and then left. The king entered next, then went out. She was still alive at that time. And when the envoys came in, they found her decapitated. The servant, the king, and the envoys were all empty-handed. How and where the head disappeared to was unknown. Then the head appeared in the country house. Who could solve this mystery?"

"He killed her," Victorique declared. "This morning, a white dove appeared from a silk hat." It sounded like a monologue. "Next, Cecile appeared from a suitcase. I thought it was a sign that something was going to appear from somewhere. I didn't expect that to actually be the case."

She shook her head, then glanced toward the stage.

The long curtain call seemed to be over.

The curtain fell heavily this time. The actors shuffled back offstage with flushed faces; they still hadn't woken up from the dream of acting on stage. They passed in front of and behind Victorique and the others like they couldn't see them, as though they were invisible ghosts.

At that moment, a strange atmosphere blanketed the area. Was Victorique and the men the invisible ghosts? Or were the actors apparitions from long past that used to perform in this theater?

Victorique closed her eyes.

A moment passed.

And she opened them slowly.

Like a ripple on water, the actors' presence drifted away into the corridor.

On an old wooden desk sat a bright crown that the actor who played the role of His Majesty Rupert had left behind. Victorique blinked, then gently took it. It was glittering.

She examined the inside, and found that it was made of paper. Only the exterior looked luxurious.

"He was wearing a large hat," Victorique resumed. "Like this one."

“Hmm.”

“It fit perfectly on his head, though.”

She put on the crown. It covered her tiny head completely from the neck up, blocking her vision. The same thing happened when Ginger Pie put the crown on her head before the play began.

Victorique tried to remove the crown. She flailed about, using both hands, but she couldn't get it off. Kazuya came close and removed it for her. Her crimson face appeared from within.

“He probably hid the head inside the hat like this.”

The man grunted.

“There is no other way he could've done it. Neither the servant nor the French envoys could've killed the woman and taken her head outside. Only he could've done it, the mightiest in the kingdom. It was possible for him to hide another head, that is, the head of the woman he had killed, on top of his own head, and leave the room.” Victorique stood up. “Only he could've done it!”

The subordinate, Jupiter Roget, charged forward from behind the blond man, His Majesty Rupert de Gilet. He raised his fist, rushing toward Victorique like a black bullet.

Kazuya swiftly blocked his path. He picked up Victorique, leaped to the side, and pushed her under the desk for safety. He then greeted Roget. The grown man's fist dug into his chest. Kazuya's vision turned blank, his breath pushed out of his lungs.

Holding on through sheer force of will, Kazuya swept Roget's leg, sending him crashing to the floor. He then mounted the man and pinned his neck down with both hands.

Roget's fists struck Kazuya repeatedly. He flinched, and Roget immediately pushed him back, sending him rolling.

The two leaped away from each other like beasts.

Kazuya stood in front of the desk, protecting Victorique. Roget, on the other hand, was standing in front of His Majesty Rupert, glowering at the boy. The king's eyes held a similar ruthless gleam.

Kazuya stood tall. Roget's wound looked worse. He was breathing heavily with his hands on his neck.

“Roget!” Victorique groaned from under the desk.

It sounded like a beast's growl. The king shuddered. It was instinctive fear. Under the desk was supposed to be a tiny, helpless girl in an extravagant dress, but there was something in her voice that sounded ferocious, almost like a wonder of nature.

"My brethren," she said.

Roget turned pale.

The king looked curious. "What is she talking about, Roget?" he asked.

Victorique's green eyes glowed eerily under the desk. A beast's eyes blinking from the depths of its pitch-black den, watching its prey.

"I don't see the problem with leaving the village to find a new way of life. My mother, Cordelia Gallo, did the same. So did my mother's companion, the red-haired Brian Roscoe. And Ambrose, the young man who escaped with us from the burning Gray Wolf village."

"..."

"That reminds me, my mother has the memento box. She's keeping it for her and Brian's safety. Your Achilles Heel. Your past. As long as they keep it hidden, they won't have to worry about getting killed."

"..."

"And we too—that is, me and Kujou—have our own safety device."

Victorique slowly crawled out from under the desk.

"Coco Rose's will that I mentioned earlier. The letter that was inside the brooch of the headless corpse buried in the grave of Nicole Leroux in the year 1900. It contains the name of the real father of the demonspawn that Queen Coco had given birth to, and words that foretold her own death. I gave the letter to a dove and sent it far away. My brethren received it. They should have kept in a safe place already."

"And?"

"If anything happens to us, Queen Coco's letter will be released to the public. The people will realize who the real culprit is. And so will the great powers of the world. Sauville will fall into disarray."

"Is that a threat?"

"No." Victorique shook her head. "I would not be so foolish as to reveal the truth without ensuring my safety. That is all."

"Why didn't you tell your father?"

Victorique smoked her pipe. "Because it would upset the balance of the world," she said in a childish voice, then looked down at her feet.

The king peered at her inquisitively.

“Father never wanted an indictment. He summoned me here in order to gain dirt on him and the Academy of Science, therefore further solidifying the power of the Ministry of the Occult. But telling my father the truth would affect the power balance within Sauville, and the path of the coming second storm.”

“I see.”

“So I’m keeping my mouth shut. You better let us live.”

The king let out a long sigh.

The audience was long gone, and the place was quiet.

On the stage, the only sound that could be heard was the props being serviced.

Were the actors still in the green room? Or had they gone home already? Tomorrow night, the curtain would rise once more. A life in rosy hues, the play under the spotlight, would restart.

His Majesty Rupert and Jupiter Roget glared at Victorique, then whirled around.

“I have a question,” the king said, hanging his head. His voice sounded as tight as a young man’s.

“What is it?”

He looked over his shoulder, still keeping his gaze downward. “Did the queen’s message say anything else besides her fear of being killed?”

“Like what?”

“Like…”

Twenty-four years ago, there was a wounded young man—a man of privilege, pride, and position, who was loved by all, but who could not win the heart of his new wife from another country. Rupert, a murderer buried within Sauville’s history.

His face twisted. “Did she only feel fear for me in her last moments?”

“I don’t know.” Victorique shook her head. “The letter was short. Had she stayed alive, you might have learned the answer to that question. You might have understood each other over time. But it’s impossible now. Even you can’t bring back the past. Her soul has long departed. Killed by your hand.”

“…”

“You will never know what was in Coco’s mind. Twenty-four years ago, you plucked the Blue Rose of Saubreme and left her to wither away.”

The emotion slowly faded from His Majesty Rupert’s face.

His was a blank expression, like a deep abyss. The bloody face of a person who had killed a loved one, crossed the line of humanity a long time ago. A *noh* mask etched with loneliness after living in solitude for years.

He turned back around and walked away.

There was dignity in his figure. He wore an air that befit a king who bore the Kingdom of Sauville on his back. It was heavy as a shadow, blue as the night, and unfathomably dark as the past.

He turned around and took a few steps back. “I see. You must be Victorique de Blois.” He kept his voice low so Roget wouldn’t hear. “The Gray Wolf that Albert claims to be the last and greatest mind in Europe.”

“What of it?”

The king’s cheeks twisted into a smile.

“The next storm is near. And I am the king, Sauville’s apostle. Tonight I’ve learned a lot about you, the weapon that the Ministry of the Occult is hiding.” The king’s coat flared, the bottom dark as night. “And I will use everything I can get my hands on.”

Victorique’s eyes widened.

“Until we meet again, little wolf. Golden-haired fairy with magical powers from the Middle Ages.”

The king and Roget disappeared into the corridor.

There were sounds of props being moved. The lights went out, turning the stage and the audience seating dark.

For a while, Victorique and Kazuya stood there in silence.

Victorique held Kazuya’s hand. Her fingers were pudgy like those of a child’s. But right now it was cold as ice, and trembling.

Kazuya squeezed her hand back reassuringly.

Victorique lifted her head. “The show is over. Finally.”

“No curtain call?”

“Give me a break. I can’t wait to return to the academy and read books in the library’s conservatory all day long.”

“You always complain about being bored, though.”

“Because I *am* bored! Every day I feel like dying.”

Victorique started walking. She was pouting for some reason. Kazuya followed, looking curious. His grapple with Roget earlier had left parts of his body sore, but he tried his best to hide it.

“But...” Victorique muttered.

“What?”

“It’s far better than putting you in harm’s way. Boring also means safe. Something I never dreamed of before.”

“Victorique...”

Kazuya went silent, caught off guard by her words. Then a smile appeared on his face.

He squeezed her hand tight once more as they walked out onto the corridor.

The lamps flickered on the walls lined with photos of past dancers. As they walked down the corridor toward the exit, time passed, bringing them closer to the present. They walked hand-in-hand in silence down the dim corridor, leaving the past and returning to the present, and further into the future.

To tomorrow.

Onwards to the future, young ones.

A faint light shone on their small figures, offering them strength.

The back door to the Phantom Theater opened.

It was simple and antiquated, completely different from the front entrance, which resembled a giant lion’s mouth. Actors streamed out onto the alley. Their appearance, like the door, was simple, different from the costumes and makeup they had been wearing earlier. Their skin looked duller from the lack of makeup. They were dressed in casual attires—worn-out coats, simple hats, and walking sticks that looked as if they had picked them up from the side of the road.

Ginger Pie came out from behind them.

A group of young actors, placing their arms on each other’s shoulders, turned the corner to a downtown bar for a drink.

A young man wrapped his arm around Ginger Pie’s shoulder. “Let’s go, Maman!” he said with a smile.

The woman gave him the same cheerful smile. “I’m going home. I have a little girl waiting for me.”

“Oh.” The young man let go of her, disappointed. “I forgot. Here, she can have this.” He pulled a bag of candy out of his pocket and handed it to Ginger Pie.

“Oh, thanks. Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay. I can not wait to see you tomorrow, Your Majesty!” bellowed the young man.

An air of tension surrounded him, and he was bathed in the same light as when he stood on stage. Ginger Pie laughed with a shrug.

She put on the aura of the Queen Mother. “Until tomorrow.”

“A pleasant evening to you, Your Majesty!”

“You too. Bye.”

The young man watched as Ginger Pie waved and then strode down the alley. Drawn by the voices of his colleagues, he turned and disappeared into the road that led to the bar in the blink of an eye.

Light snow was falling on the street. A small woman was coming toward Ginger Pie’s direction.

She was wearing a puffy dress, though it was too dark to make out the color, with a fur coat over it. On her tiny head, atop her golden hair, sat an ornate headdress with a plume. The wind blew, flaring the bottom of her coat like a bird spreading its wings.

Somewhere an owl hooted.

The woman had a companion. Wearing a black coat, he seemed to blend into the darkness. His red hair burned coldly in the dusk like flames.

Ginger Pie realized that it was the little girl she had met in the theater earlier. Though she had her guardian with her, a child shouldn’t be out this late. The girl was looking down with a nervous expression.

“You should go home,” Ginger Pie said when they passed by each other.

The girl’s breath seized. She then lowered her head even more. “Okay,” she replied softly, her voice almost inaudible.

“You can come visit the theater again if you want. I’d love to talk about your *maman* again. About Cordelia Gallo, the little purple jewel.”

“Okay.” The woman nodded.

Her slender chin seemed to quiver. Her dainty, rose-embossed boots moved.

Hmm?

Ginger Pie cocked her head. She wondered if the girl called Victorique wore the same shoes. She thought hers was pink and glittering like glass.

An owl hooted again.

Ginger Pie sensed the woman stop behind her.

She, too, stopped in her tracks.

Listen, you're not alone.

So stop crying.

Ginger Pie.

Life in rosy hues!

A familiar voice was singing. Surprised, Ginger Pie turned around.

"C-Cor..."

A gust of wind blew. Bare trees lining the street rattled. A few dead leaves fluttered onto the pavement.

The small woman and the red-haired man had vanished like ghosts.

Like time travelers from the past.

The voice lingered for a moment. While the past could never be retrieved, tender memories would last forever.

Ginger Pie stood there in the street, puzzled. Then slowly she turned on her heel.

"I must've been imagining things," she mumbled. "I feel like I met an old friend. Just an illusion, perhaps."

She wiped the small tear in her eye with the back of her hand. Then she resumed walking, her gait more jaunty than before, despite crying a little.

At the end of the alley, she turned a corner. She arrived at a messy area downtown, not far from the glamorous street corner where the theater was located. The smell of food and sewage mingled in the air. It was quiet, yet at the same time somewhat noisy. The sound of a married couple quarreling and dishes breaking came from the distance. Children's laughter rolled out from a different window, together with the smell of stew. Separate lives all clustered together.

Ginger Pie opened the door to the boarding house, stepped inside, and went quietly up the stairs, careful not to make a sound.

"We have no cakes, nor any muffins," she sang softly. "But we do have stale bread!"

She stopped her feet from dancing, but her hands moved naturally. She was performing in front of an unseen audience.

“We have no prince on a white horse, nor an Arabian king. But we have a lover!”

She stopped in front of a door, took the key from her pocket, and opened it gently.

A small room. A table and a chair. A very large cabinet.

There was a bed inside, and moonlight streaming in through a small window illuminated the pillow softly. A little girl with curly hair, like an angel in a painting, was sleeping with her tiny fists clenched, as though she was about to fight the world.

“Life in rosy hues!” Ginger Pie grinned broadly as she finished the rest of the song.

She placed the bag of candy that the young man had given her earlier by the pillow. Yawning, she changed quickly into her nightgown and snuggled down next to the girl.

Soon after, she was breathing softly as the child.

The moonlight from the small window shone on their faces.

Meanwhile...

The phone was ringing in the underground hall of the Phantom Theater, the fortress of the Ministry of the Occult.

When in the past the spacious area was filled with dancers running around on roller-skates, heels clacking, singing as their skirts fluttered, now there were officials in black suits working restlessly with grim faces, sorting out papers, talking, making phone calls.

In a large chair in the middle sat an older man, one of the Ministry of the Occult’s key figures. After receiving word of an incoming call, he took the phone.

As he listened to the voice on the other end, his face gradually contorted.

“There’s no signs of her giving birth?” He cocked his head to the right. “Are you sure about that? The headless corpse found in Nicole Leroux’s grave, the one covered in wax. Coco Rose’s body. She gave birth to a bastard child, which led to her demise.”

After a while of silence, he hung up.

He put a finger to his chin, blinking. “What does this mean?” He racked his brain. “Coco didn’t give birth?”

A moment later, the man sighed and stood up. Turned up the collar of his coat, he leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. He called the other officials and gave a report. There was confusion, murmurs, and anger.

The man then stared at the ceiling, as if trying to see through the distant past.

“I must tell Marquis de Blois,” he mumbled to no one in particular. “But either way, there’s no way of knowing anymore. It all happened so long ago. No evidence either.”

The lamps flickered, illuminating the man’s face faintly.

His trembling arms then slammed onto papers, the phone, chairs, throwing and smashing them, scattering stacks of papers all over the place. The other officials grunted in rage, kicked the walls, roared like beasts.

The lamps continued flickering.

“A Christmas gift?” Ms. Cecile asked.

In front of a steel carriage parked on the street corner, Kazuya, Cecile, and Sophie, were talking among themselves. Kazuya was wearing a serious look, arms folded, while Sophie was wiping her tears and blowing her nose, still not recovering from the emotions of watching the play.

The group was loitering in front of the carriage that would take them back to St. Marguerite Academy, the same one that brought Victorique to Saubreme. But Inspector Blois had gone shopping because the department stores and retail shops were still open. Victorique was already sitting inside the carriage, looking out the window melancholically.

Kazuya, however, was anxious. “I heard that in the west, people send each other cards and gifts on the day of Christ’s birth. I’m gonna go buy something. So um, Teach, if you don’t mind...”

Blushing, he pointed to the window of a shop just in front of where the carriage was parked.

There was a cute dollhouse on display, modeled after a simple village house, with plastered walls and red wooden frames. Inside were dolls of a boy and a girl. Snow had accumulated on its roof.

“Oh!” Ms. Cecile nodded.

She studied Kazuya’s face, peered at Victorique in the carriage, and then looked at Kazuya’s face again.

Kazuya turned even redder. “And also this one.” He pointed at an item beside the dollhouse.

It was a sparkling gold pendant.

“I got it!” Ms. Cecile nodded with a look that said she understood everything.

“What are you guys talking about?” Sophie asked, wiping her tears.

Ms. Cecile smiled. “You want to give it to Victorique, yes?”

“Um, yeah.” Kazuya hesitated for a bit. Then steeling himself, he clicked his shoes together and straightened his back. “Yes, Ma’am!”

“In that case, do I have a great intel for you. Remember when we went to Sam’s bakery? There was something I couldn’t tell you. Christmas is also an important day for you.”

“Oh, right.” Kazuya nodded. “You did mention that.” His face was still red.

Ms. Cecile stood on tip-toe, brought her mouth close to Kazuya’s ear, and mumbled something. Kazuya listened with a straight face.

“What?!” he yelped. He stretched and looked at Victorique in the carriage.

Ms. Cecile pressed her forefinger against her lips. “Ssh! Ssh!”

“I see. I didn’t know that. In that case...”

“Hehe. I told you it was great intel.”

“It really was.” Kazuya stood at attention and bent at a full ninety degrees at the waist.

Ms. Cecile flared her nostrils. “Uh-huh.”

“Thank you, Teach. I’m, uh... going to buy something, then.” He fidgeted. “A Christmas gift, and another extra.”

Ms. Cecile nodded. “That’s right. Buy two.”

A gust of wind blew. Pedestrian’s collars and scarves flapped.

Kazuya dashed toward the dollhouse store. As Ms. Cecile watched him through the glass window, he straightened his back and walked stiffly. He then pointed at the dollhouse by the window. Back when he just arrived in Sauville, he was thinner, childlike, and somewhat incompetent, but now he looked like a full-fledged man.

Ms. Cecile smiled a smile that was both sad yet happy. “They grow up so fast.”

Inside the dollhouse, the dolls seemed to be smiling happily.

Ms. Cecile peered closer at the dollhouse through the window.

“All right. I’m going home,” Sophie said.

Ms. Cecile turned around, and blinked. “What do you mean you’re going home? You’re riding in the carriage with us, aren’t you?”

“What are you talking about, Miss Lafitte?” Sophie shrugged, then put on a helmet. “If I join you, who will take the Chairman’s new motorcycle back to the academy? I’ll drive home alone. You, Kujou, Victorique, and that weird, pointy-headed police inspector with the rabbit can go together.”

Ms. Cecile put her hands on her hips. “Why are you always like this?!”

Sophie mounted the motorcycle, which had been left parked on the street.

“I’ll listen to your lecture tomorrow.”

The shop’s door creaked open, and out came Kazuya with a large bag in both hands. One was a Christmas gift, wrapped with a red ribbon, while the other, larger package was adorned with a yellow ribbon.

He stopped, and looked at Sophie in astonishment.

“Hmm?” Sophie looked puzzled.

Ms. Cecile was on the back of the motorbike, her arm wrapped around Sophie’s stomach. She wanted to go home together, it seemed. She looked grumpy, and her lips were pursed tight.

Sophie was deep in thought for a while, then said, “Well, whatever.” She revved the engine.

Kazuya scuttled to the motorbike, but the large packages slowed him down.

“Ms. Cecile!” He tried to stop them. “That motorbike is very dangerous! You could crash into a field, end up racing against young noblemen, or go the wrong way. It was dangerous during the day, and when it’s this dark out... Ah, Ms. Cecile!”

The sound of the engine instantly drowned out Kazuya’s warning.

The engine growled as if alive, then took off, meandering recklessly through the main road of Saubreme.

“Teeeach!”

He could hear her faint shriek from the distance.

Standing there blankly, Kazuya saw the motorbike dangerously turning left at the intersection, then vanished from sight.

“Teach...”

Kazuya opened the carriage door and placed the bags inside. He then stood on the street, put his palms together, and prayed.

“Namandabu... Namandabu...”

“What on earth are you moaning about, Kujou? Do you have a stomach ache? Must be terrible.”

Kazuya turned around with a start. He spotted a golden pointed cannon with a red-eyed, white rabbit riding it.

“Whoa!”

“I’m done shopping. Oh, did you buy something too? We have good chemistry.”

“No, we don’t. Please don’t even joke about it, Inspector.”

They jostled into the big, black carriage.

Victorique, sitting in the window seat, glanced over at them, brows furrowed. They were pulling each other’s hair, pushing the other with their elbows. She turned her eyes back outside.

Her golden hair hung loosely. Green eyes gazed silently into the distance.

Kazuya sat down next to her and breathed a sigh. Inspector Blois looked away, ignoring them completely. The rabbit on top of his head was staring at them.

“You’re so quiet, Victorique. What’s wrong?” Kazuya asked hesitantly.

“It’s nothing new, is it?” Her voice was far from depressed. She turned her head slowly and looked Kazuya straight in the eyes. “I was simply thinking how yet another piece of this kingdom’s past had left.”

“Right.” Kazuya nodded. “The truth behind Queen Coco’s murder, which had been a mystery for so long, was finally revealed. Tonight was a very frightening night for Sauville.”

“Ahuh.” Victorique put her pipe in her mouth. “A stone that had blocked the river’s flow is gone. This might speed up the fate of this country. How will the Ministry of the Occult, the Academy of Science, and His Majesty the King move after this? What will happen to the balance of the world? Will it collapse and rebuild itself anew? Or...”

“Or what?”

“...I do not know. There’s not enough fragments of chaos.” Victorique shook her head a little uneasily. “All I can feel is that something big is

moving. A disturbing presence. And it will come soon. That's all I can say for now."

Kazuya looked up. He straightened his back and looked into the distance. "Either way, we're in this together."

Victorique didn't argue or ignore what he said; she only smiled thinly. A drop of life fell on her cold, doll-like features, sparkling like a beacon in a vast darkness.

It was faint, but to Kazuya it was a firm answer. He smiled back.

The rabbit stirred on top of the cannon.

Soon after, the carriage lurched into motion. Two black horses galloped down the main road, hooves clattering. Gaining speed, the carriage left everything behind—the Phantom Theater's lion mouth, the wax models—in the past.

And moved towards the future.

Bury the past and head onto tomorrow.

The steel carriage drove away quietly from the cold winter streets of Saubreme, carrying Victorique, Kazuya, and Inspector Blois.

Epilogue: Mother and Son

“The rabbit may as well be the main body.”

“Victorique? Did you just say something?”

Two jet-black horses, manes billowing like black smoke, were galloping through the night-shrouded forest. Hooves drummed on the snowy road, and wheels screeched.

The large, black, steel carriage, a dot from above, had left the streets of Saubreme, sped through the suburb, and was making its way through the desolate woods. It was late at night, and the passengers in the carriage were the only living things awake.

Inspector Blois was sleeping like a log, half-slumped to the floor. He was leaning against a pile of shopping boxes with his mouth wide open. At the top of his head was a white rabbit perched on a golden cannon, looking down as if it were on the top of the world. It seemed to have taken a liking to the spot and would not move.

In the seat across, Kazuya was sitting upright like a *samurai*, staring straight ahead. Victorique was leaning against him, looking sleepy. She was holding a pipe in her hand.

“I was watching my brother,” she mumbled.

“Yeah?”

“I was thinking: what if the rabbit on his head was the main body, and my brother was some sort of armor? He’s moving at the will of the rabbit.”

“So you’re half-asleep. I remember the last time you were sleepwalking. You mentioned something about squirrels and speaking in their language.”

Victorique grunted.

“But an excellent observation nevertheless,” Kazuya said.

Outside the window, the frozen moon glimmered. It seemed as though the king of the underworld’s carriage, carrying the dead, was running through the forest on its way back to his home. It was terribly cold inside. The temperature was completely different from the city.

Kazuya stifled a yawn. “It’s starting to look that way to me, too. The inspector is asleep, while the rabbit is awake.”

“Right?”

“But what if that was really the case? If the rabbit dies, then Inspector Blois will just crumble and never move again?”

“Now that is an excellent observation. Let’s try it right away.”

Rubbing her sleepy eyes, Victorique stretched out her chubby hands toward the rabbit. Sensing disaster, the rabbit glared down at her.

“Prepare yourself!” Victorique rose to her feet.

“Hey, watch out!” Kazuya stopped her.

Inspector Blois slept through it all, oblivious to the danger.

The carriage rocked as it ran over a stone.

Victorique and Kazuya looked out the window, cheek to cheek. They had made it through the never-ending snowy forest and were gradually approaching the familiar village. The train station, which looked like a tiny candy box, was visible in the distance.

The thought of finally returning home brought a smile to Kazuya’s face. He poked Victorique’s cheek, and she slapped his hand away. His smile widened.

“...Hmm?”

Past the station, just as the carriage entered the village road, he saw a lantern swaying as though asking for help. He squinted.

The carriage came to a slow halt. A moment later, the old driver showed up, scratching his frozen gray beard. Kazuya opened the window.

“What’s the matter?” Victorique asked.

“Some people got their wagon stuck,” the old man said reluctantly.

“They seem to be residents of the village.”

“That sounds awful.”

“It’s cold, and I feel bad for them, so I’d like to give them a ride. But the gentleman might not like the idea.”

Victorique glanced at Inspector Blois. He was sleeping with his mouth open so wide a whole apple could fit in it. The rabbit on his head nodded grandly in his stead.

“It should be fine,” Victorique said. The driver returned with jaunty steps.

Soon after, they saw a young male servant carrying a lantern and a middle-aged lady walking toward the carriage.

The two looked vaguely familiar to Kazuya. After thinking about it for a bit, he let out a gasp.

“Hmm? What is it?” Victorique asked.

“I remember now. They’re from the gentian plantation just outside the academy. I see them often, a lady and her servant.”

“Gentian? Hmm.”

“Oh, come in! You must be cold.” Kazuya politely invited them in.

The lady entered first, and then the young servant climbed in, thanking them. They gave a start at the sight of Inspector Blois and the rabbit, then gracefully looked away.

The horses neighed, and the carriage started running again. Hooves drummed loudly.

“We’re students at St. Marguerite Academy, and we’re on our way back from a trip,” Kazuya said. “And the one sleeping there is a police inspector from the station.”

“I’ve heard rumors of a peculiar inspector recently,” the lady said.

“That’s him. Have you been living in the village for a while?”

“Yes. For a long time now.” The lady nodded with a soft smile.

Her silver hair—it was difficult to tell what color it was originally—was tied up high. She wore a simple dress and a coat. Her skin was mottled with freckles and spots from repeated sunburns caused by working the fields. Her slightly-sunken blue eyes flickered benevolently. She was a graceful lady who naturally wore a gentle and quiet air about her.

The carriage continued on the village road. Moonlight streamed in through the window.

Suddenly the young servant looked outside and pointed to St. Marguerite Academy in the distance.

“The clock tower is gone,” he said.

“Yeah.” The lady nodded.

Kazuya and Victorique thought they were lady-and-servant, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“It was a place filled with memories,” the young man went on.

“Where I was blessed with you,” the lady added.

“Isn’t that why we live in this village, *Maman*?”

“That’s right.”

Victorique’s eyes narrowed, and her glossy, cherry lips tightened.

The lady with the gentle blue eyes was pondering somberly with her right palm on her wrinkled cheek and her elbow on the back of her left hand. It looked like a habit ingrained in her body over the years. She tilted her head slightly and stared dreamily into the distance.

The young man of mixed blood wrapped his arm around the lady’s shoulder reassuringly.

“But it’s fine,” the lady whispered. “I have you with me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. I don’t need glory, fame, admiration, or anything. A quiet life and the ones I love are enough for me.”

They smiled at each other in silence.

The carriage rocked.

Kazuya’s face turned pale. He sat speechless with his back straightened, but there was tension in his cheeks.

Soon the carriage came to a quiet stop near the academy. The horses neighed.

The lady and the young man thanked them and disembarked.

The carriage started running again. In the empty seats, there was a thick scent of the past, the lingering aroma of ghosts.

“V-Victorique,” Kazuya said, his face ashen. “Those two just now...”

“Yes.” Victorique nodded, blowing out smoke.

Her golden hair hung to the floor. Her dress was as red as blood, adorned with layers of luxurious torchon laces. Victorique stared at the empty seat with the eyes of a tiny but ferocious beast.

“You mentioned that they owned a gentian plantation.”

“They do.”

“Gentian is an ingredient of absinthe. They make absinthe.” Victorique paused. She took a puff and slowly blew out smoke. “Because it’s Coco Rose’s favorite.”

“So that was her!” Kazuya yelped.

Inspector Blois groaned.

Kazuya quickly dropped his voice to a whisper. “That was the same woman who was supposed to have been killed by the king twenty-four

years ago? The young, pretty, shy, and immensely popular lady in the photos?!”

“Yes.” Victorique nodded softly. “And the real star of tonight’s long-awaited show. An older Coco Rose, the legendary queen of Sauville.”

“But how?”

“There were actually two people who went missing in this case. I thought there was nothing we could do, of course, since it happened so long ago. One was a baby of mixed race that Queen Coco was supposed to have given birth to, according to her letter. If he lived, he would be a young man in his twenties now. And the other one...”

“Who is it?”

“Did you forget? Coco Rose brought a maid from France,” Victorique murmured in her deep, husky voice. “She and Coco were very good friends, and they used to chat for hours in Coco’s bedroom. Accordingly, they looked very much alike.”

The carriage shook. It passed carefully through the main gate of St. Marguerite Academy and slowed down as it drove through the night-shrouded French-style garden. The school building, the dormitories, and everywhere else were dark, with no lights on. The place looked like a ruin that had been abandoned for ages.

“I don’t know if they were just close friends, or if she was a double brought from France, whose role was to die in the place of the queen in case of an emergency,” Victorique continued. “Anyway, I believe that in those final moments, Queen Coco and the maid switched places. A shocking turn of events. The maid was killed and Coco Rose fled the palace with the baby. Then came Nicole Leroux, who was recruited by the culprit’s group. In this case that’s about to be buried in the shadows of history, there were actually three women who looked exactly alike. The queen, the maid, and the dancer. Shuffled by the clutches of fate, they turned into different people, two died, head and bodies buried in different places. Only one survived. The real Queen Coco.”

The carriage came to a slow halt. The horses whinnied.

“She must have returned to the village where she shared memories with the alchemist Leviathan. She raised her child while taking care of a gentian plantation right next to the academy. Her mixed-race son was mistaken for a servant by the villagers, though. No one, not government officials, not the

villagers, even dreamed that Queen Coco was here. Why? Because she was originally a very ordinary girl. If she took off her dress and the tiara on her head, and kept a low profile, she would never have to worry about being found.”

There was a gasp, and Inspector Blois woke up.

Kazuya opened the door and disembarked first, then reached out to help Victorique down.

“Either way, the past is far gone,” Victorique mumbled. “This is the afterstory of those who, by the ironic twist of fate, were dragged to the front stage of history. There will be no records of it. The quiet and precious remainder of Coco Rose’s life.”

“Yeah.”

The school was quiet, as though no living soul was around. The French garden was covered in snow, and the pale moon shone its rays all over. Everything—the roofs of the gazebos, the walls of the school building, the iron benches—was frozen in the cold of the winter night. Victorique shivered.

Inspector Blois, with the rabbit on his head, mumbled, “Huh? Where’s the rabbit?”

An owl hooted. It sounded very close, but a look around revealed nothing.

A cold wind blew.

Victorique yawned and rubbed her eyes.

It was very late at night. The long, long day was finally coming to an end.

“I see. So that’s what happened.”

Two people were perched on top of a carriage like large black birds, looking down on the world below.

Jade-green fur coat fluttered in the night breeze, like a bird spreading its wings. The feather on her headdress swayed coldly, and her golden hair rippled in the night sky. Green eyes gleamed in the darkness.

“Queen Coco survived by switching places with a look-alike. And now she and the most precious person to her, her son, are living peacefully.”

“Cordelia. What’s on your mind?” the large, black shadow beside her—Brian—grunted. His glossy black coat blended in perfectly with the

darkness, but his flaming red hair fluttered ominously in the wind like a torch.

“...Nothing.”

Brian snorted.

“The maid who accompanied Queen Coco from France must have loved her deeply. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have been able to switch places at a moment’s notice.”

“We should get going. It’s time for the kids to go to sleep.”

“I know.”

Cordelia rose to her feet. Brian also stood up, carried Cordelia’s slim figure with great care, and jumped off the carriage, leaping into the distance.

A large black bird with a red head, and a tiny bird with green wings and a long golden tail, flitted through the darkness of the night and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

An owl hooted.

The wind blew, shaking the bare trees in the garden.

As Kazuya started walking, he looked over his shoulder.

He thought he heard someone’s voice.

He thought he saw shadows stirring on top of the carriage. But then a strong wind blew, and Kazuya closed his eyes momentarily.

When he opened them, the shadows were gone, and there was nothing but a vast European night.

“What’s wrong?” Victorique asked.

“It’s nothing.” Kazuya shook his head. He accompanied her to the flowerbed maze. “You should go to bed,” he said as they walked through the flowerbeds. “Kids should be asleep at this time.”

“But you’re a kid too, Kujou.”

“I’m a little bit older than you.”

“Why are you acting so smug? There’s barely any difference.”

“But you look more tired than me. And that’s because you’re a little bit younger.” He snickered.

“What are you grinning about?” Victorique kicked his shin.

Kazuya jumped. “Ouch!”

He glared at Victorique a little, then immediately returned to a smile. Holding hands with Victorique, they walked along the path.

The desolate flowerbeds were chilly. But come spring, the colorful flowers would bloom once more. Then Kazuya would come to see Victorique, either through the flower paths or by running up the labyrinthine stairs of the library tower, bringing delicious candies, rumors of unusual incidents, and other souvenirs that would please the little, stubborn, lonely, and beautiful princess.

They would meet again, every day.

Every single day.

Holding hands tightly, Victorique and Kazuya continued strolling through the flowerbed maze that seemed to go on forever.

Sometimes Victorique kicked Kazuya, and he would jump. The sound of Victorique's snorts and Kazuya's grumbling echoed in the distance. But still, neither let go of the other's hand.

The moonlight softly illuminated their tiny figures in white.

Gosick - Volume 07

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